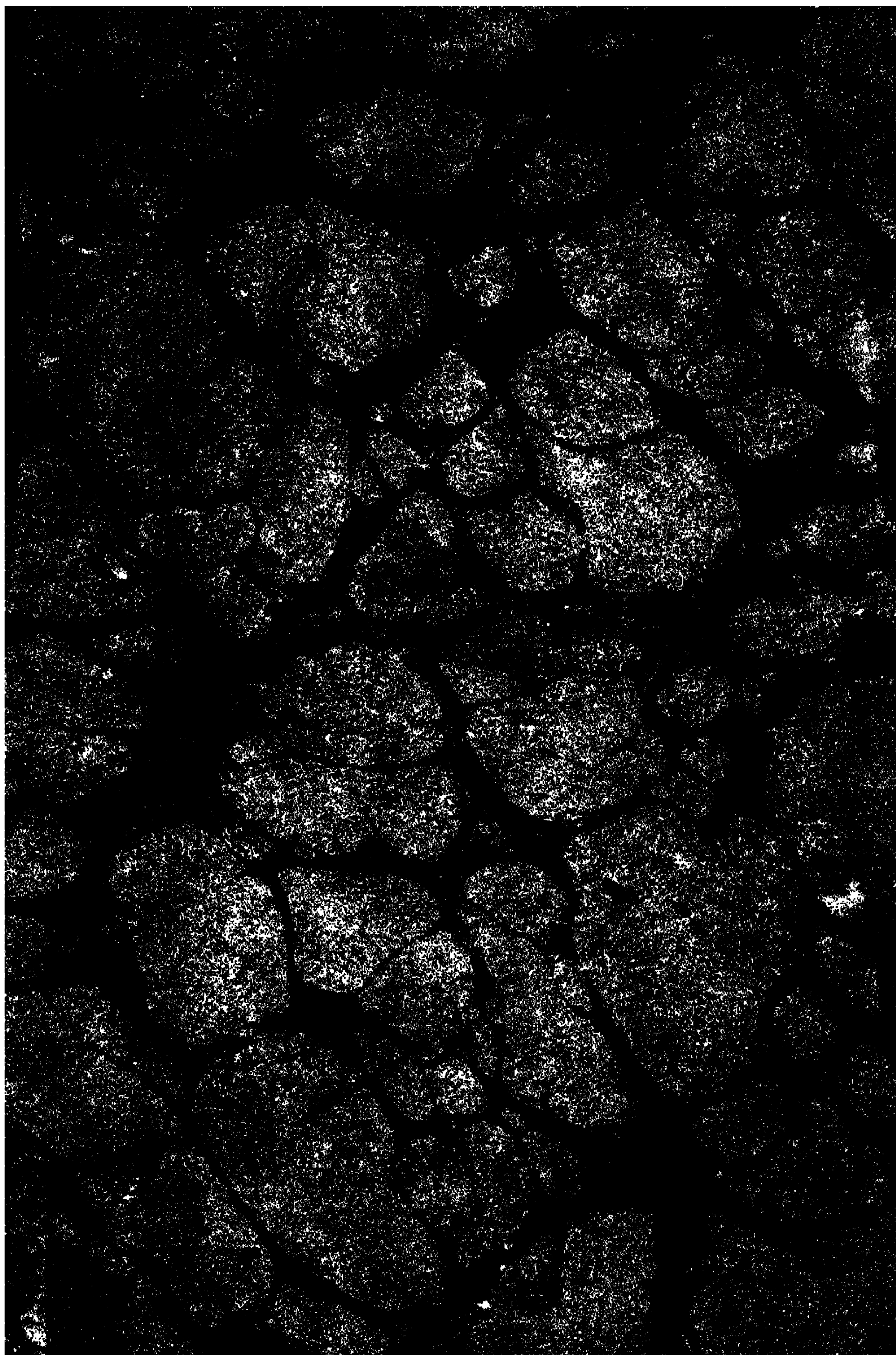
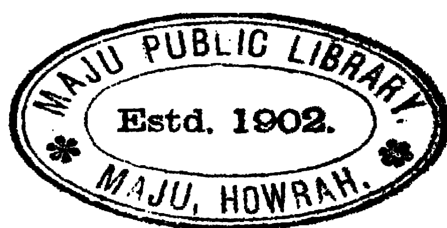


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OUGHT WE TO VISIT HER?



OUGHT WE TO VISIT HER?

BY

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CONTENTS

And Mr. Theobald, again having recourse to his eyeglass, takes a meerschaum from his pocket, fills it, strikes a vesuvian, and composedly begins to smoke.

"A whole batch of our nearest Chalkshire neighbours are now in Spa, Jane," he resumes after a time, "arrived here from Germany last night. The Crosbies, *père et mère;* the young hopeful, Rawdon; and the red-haired heiress, Miss Marsland, whom Rawdon's mamma destines him to marry. I ran against them all this morning, thought I remembered old Crosbie's face, and, assisted by the visitor's book, found out who they were. Jenny, my dear, what will life be like when you begin your little battle for social existence with women like Mrs. Crosbie? She is clothed in an olive-green silk of the same awful and uncompromising texture that I remember about my own sisters years ago. Virtue sits throned upon her forehead, exclusiveness in her eye——"

"And what does all this matter to us? and why should there be a battle between me and anybody?" interrupts Jane. "I want these Chalkshire people to like me—well, to tolerate me, because I'm your wife; and for Blossy to grow up——"

"Into a Miss Marsland?" finishes Theobald, as his wife hesitates. "Quite impossible, Jane. Blossy is your daughter."

"Blossy hasn't got red hair," cries Jane, warming. "Blossy mayn't be a lady any more than me, but she will be a pretty woman some day, whether your fine country people notice her mother or not. And a pretty woman——"

But the sentence remains for ever incomplete. Jane gives a significant nod at the reflection of her own bright face in an opposite looking-glass, then bends it down again over her work, and at the end of another five minutes the bonnet is finished.

Minute classifications of the human race are, as a rule, failures when we try to reduce them to practice. But it may be said broadly, perhaps, that women can be divided into two sections—those who know how to make a bonnet, and those who do not. Jane knows how to make a bonnet right well, and never has she felt the consciousness of triumphant art stronger in her soul than at this minute.

"I don't say anything about black lace," she bursts forth energetically, and *apropos* of nothing, as is her habit; Mr. Theobald, his feet perched on the window-sill at a higher elevation than his head, a cloud of tobacco smoke floating upward from his lips, turns his head a good half-inch to listen; "anyone not absolutely a fool can make a bonnet out of black lace. But gauze! blue gauze! I should like to know whether there's a lady—yes, and what's more, a milliner—in Chalkshire that could make a bonnet like this?"

"Not one of them could look as you will look in it, my dear Jenny," says Theobald, in his pleasant lazy voice.

Jane turns away with just visible impatience from the compliment, and walking across to one of the many mirrors with which the room is lined, begins the process (a process beset with misgivings even to the fairest and youngest woman living) of "trying on" her bonnet.

To say that it is not absolute perfection, needing no after-touch, no subtle inspiration of mature genius, would be only to say that the artist is mortal. It must be pinched back off the temples; must be raised the third of an inch in diadem; the effect must be hazarded of knotting the gauzy strings around the throat, then of letting them stream unbound upon the shoulders; finally, one must see oneself—aided by an opposite mirror—in different angles: profile; three-quarters; in perspective!

"It is perfect," cries Jane, at last. "I never looked better in a bonnet in my life!" And saying this she advances and stands before her husband; stands before him, no longer with an air of questioning or doubt, but rather with the calm consciousness of assured artistic success written on her face.

What a fresh face it is! Mrs. Theobald has been married close upon four years, but her cheeks are just as blooming, her blue eyes as limpid, her smile as delightfully frank, as on the day when Theobald, after a fortnight's acquaintance, made her, an unfledged ballet-girl of sixteen, his wife.

She is, but scarcely looks, above the middle height of English women, has large well-balanced shoulders, an exquisite waist—if judged by a sculptor's, not a corset-maker's standard—and decidedly more of undulating, flowing ease in her movements than women of the world are prone to display.

"Till I was sixteen—till the time you raised me above my station, sir—I was trained to move my limbs well," says Jane, when Theobald occasionally hints to her how vividly some trick of gait or manner brings old theatrical associations before his mind. "And although I am in the position of a lady now, I can't remember always to be awkward."

Whalebone and steel have as little share in her lithe symmetry as have Kalydor or pearl powders with the honest carnation and white of her complexion. Everything about Jane is real; terribly real, impostors of all classes are made to feel when they come too nigh her. She is somewhat untidy at times; being her own milliner, a dress or bonnet, wanted for such an hour, has occasionally to be finished imperfectly as regards the length of stitches; but clean—clean, her husband affirms with gravity, to a vice. The smell of primroses, the sweetness of April fields, all things wholesome, out-of-door, vernal are irresistibly summoned before your vision when you look at Jane. Her face is the delight of artists, the despair of photographers. It has not a perfect feature, and yet, with its changeful expressions and brilliant colouring, and absolute naturalness, it is so perfect! "The good looks of youth and robust health," say her detractors, who are, without

exception, of her own sex. "Her mouth is too wide, her eyes are common-place. She has two distinct marks of smallpox on her forehead, and you have only to look at her in a mirror to see that her nose is not *set straight* on her face."

Poor Jane! And she continues charming still.

On this particular afternoon—an afternoon destined, in more ways than one, to prove a landmark in her life—she is dressed in a little striped blue-and-white muslin of twenty-five francs, with a black lace cape round her shoulders. A pair of cream-coloured gloves, a white parasol, a fresh-gathered rose for her waistbelt, lie in readiness on her work-table.

"You are coming with me, Theobald?" For a long minute Mr. Theobald's eyes and pipe have been literally sending forth incense at the shrine of Jane's vanity. "Do now, like a good old soul! It isn't much trouble to walk as far as the avenue, and then, if these Chalkshire people are about——"

"Oh! you are afraid of the Chalkshire Mrs. Grundy already, are you, Jenny? Well, I'll come and do a little respectability, for her edification, by-and-by, if I can remember not to fall asleep meanwhile. As a precautionary measure, hadn't you better take Blossy for your chaperon now?"

"Blossy went out with Elize after her dinner. Young monkey, see what she has been doing here!" Jane picks up a hideously-battered doll, into whose dropsical body shreds of blue crape, ribbon, and other odds and ends of finery, are thickly pinned. "Isn't that taste? What, not for a baby only three years old! And see, she's actually cut Nancy's hair short on the forehead, to be in the fashion, bless her heart!"

"Bless her—bless her!" says Theobald, stretching out his hand theatrically over Nancy's battered head.

The colour rises into Jane's cheeks. "Oh, you always turn things into ridicule; you never see any cleverness in what the child does—but *I* do. Very likely she won't be accomplished, book-clever, as your fine county ladies are, but she'll be able to work at her needle, to use her hands, to be useful, Mr. Theobald! and, as far as I can see, those are the first accomplishments men require from their wives."

Mrs. Theobald puts Nancy tenderly aside, takes up her gloves and parasol, and moves towards the door.

"If Blossy can use her hands (and her tongue) as her dear mother does, Jenny, she'll be a treasure, an inestimable treasure, to the man who is fortunate enough to win her."

"Yes—you mean so much of that! I know so well what your compliments are worth!"

But she turns, half mollified. A word can thaw, as a word can chill the girl, so long as the word be spoken by Theobald's lips.

Mr. Theobald raises himself from his reclining position, and takes his pipe from between his lips. "I mean it always when I say flattering things of you, my love. If Blossy only inherits half of her mother's admirable qualities, she will be——"

"Make haste, please. I don't want to lose more than I can help of the band. If poor little Blossy inherits my gifts?——"

"She will be an exceedingly charming woman, Jane. A good milliner; on occasion, a good cook; a perfect dancer; a thorough adept in the art of making any young fool who is taken by her pretty face miserable; and to her husband at all times the most excellent company in the world."

The blood is not in Jane's cheeks alone now. It stains her forehead, her throat; an angry tremble comes round her lips.

"A cook—a milliner—a dancer. Oh, I understand you, Theobald—a dancer! And this, after four years, is the highest praise you can find to give me?"

Theobald by now is thoroughly amused. No sarcasm, however bitter, can scathe his well-oiled spirit. How shall he guess that a jest, lightly spoken, lightly meant, may have power to wound Jane's jealous heart to the quick!

"I dare say I could find much more if you would give me time to think. You have faults, Jenny, of course, who has not? But experience will cure these—experience and the salutary advice of judicious female friends, to which our altered position in life will now enable you to have access. There are my sisters—a little crooked-tempered, a little straight-laced, certainly, but an epitome of all female wisdom and propriety in themselves, Charlotte especially. Then, if you behave very well, you may get to know our neighbour, Mrs. Crosbie; perhaps, in time, the archdeacon's wife, and——"

"And you think sermons preached to me by any of these women will do me, Jane Theobald, good? Where is their right to preach? They are better born; they have never worked for their bread; have never toiled at a rehearsal, or grilled up among the gas battens in a transformation scene! Does this entitle them to mount the pulpit?"

"Morally, no; socially, yes."

"Then I hate such socialism." Theobald successfully represses a smile; "and I despise such morality. And if any of them were to preach to me, and I was to listen—which I shouldn't—it would demoralise—yes, demoralise me!"

"Don't use strong language, my dear. It is a question exclusively of finance. If we had come into six thousand a year, instead of six hundred, we should be the nicest people in Chalkshire, Jenny, and want sermons from no man."

"I've read in the papers," goes on Jane, her tone waxing hotter and hotter; "I've read in the papers lately about the grand model markets set up in Bethnal Green, and such places—set up for the poor. Bishops and lords at the

cleanliness, ventilation, marble slabs—every advantage! And the poor won't go to them, and will sooner get worse things, and pay dearer to their old friends the costermongers in the gutter."

"The poor are proverbially an ungrateful set of devils," is Mr. Theobald's cheerful generalisation.

"They are human beings, and I feel as they do," says Jane. "Perhaps because I belong to the vagrant classes myself—I don't know about that—but I feel as they do. I hate advantages that have a do-me-good flavour in them——"

"Certainly, my dear, but——"

"I was born among people, among ideas that no man or woman of your class of life can understand. You raised me from them, Theobald, and if I've become, as you say sometimes, 'an imitation better than the reality of a lady,' it has been by living with you, and getting hold of your *outward manners* simply, but at heart——"

"Jennie!"

"At heart I've never given up my old associates, or my love for them, or my belief that their lives are as good as other lives, and I never will. No, not if all the ladies from all the counties in England were to preach to me at once. I'd be like the ungrateful, heathen poor. I'd keep to the costermongers still."

After this there is silence for a minute. Mr. Theobald is the first to speak. "Come here, Jenny, child," holding out his hand to her, kindly.

"No, thank you. I can hear quite as well where I am."

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'logic'?"

"Of course I do. I wasn't pretending to talk logic. I was talking common sense; yes, and I was speaking from my heart, straight out, as you—as you, Theobald, never do!"

"Do you know, in the very least, how all this animated discussion began?"

"I know how it will end." She has moved across the room, and looks at him, her fingers on the handle of the door. "You said something just now about my having to do battle with fine ladies like this Mrs. Crosbie, the fine ladies of your class, sir, in Chalkshire. A few minutes afterwards you tell me of the good I may get if I choose to listen, humbly and gratefully, to their advice. Very well. Now, I'll tell you the truth plainly. If our going to England, and our living at Theobalds is to make me a *hypocrite*—I mean if I am to choose between becoming a *hypocrite*, and declaring war to the knife with every fine lady in Chalkshire, I have made my choice already. War to the knife!"

Having uttered which trenchant declaration, Jane, like a whirlwind (in blue and white muslin), sweeps away from the room and down the staircase of the hotel, and Mr. Theobald is left alone to enjoy his pipe and cull the honey of his own reflections.

CHAPTER II.

A QUESTION OF DUTY.

All is bright, sunshiny, cheerful, in the out-of-door world. The season is crude as yet, for it is scarcely past the middle of June; but there are visitors enough to give an air of quasi-occupation to the streets and avenues of the little mountain town. And to those whose tastes affect sweet sunshine and verdant country, rather than princesses and archdukes, early summer is assuredly the time when Spa has most charms.

It is now the gayest hour of the afternoon, and down in the Avenue of the Fours Hours a band is playing. How pleasant it is to catch the distant notes, prolonged, hushed, heightened at intervals by the arena of wooded hills which form the walls of the *al fresco* concert-room! How gloriously the sun streams through the linden boughs, turning the courtyard pavement of the Hotel Bellevue into a mosaic work of ever-shifting gold! What an altogether palatable thing mere existence is! What an excellent place is this best of all possible worlds to live in!

"Each one of us," says Göthe, "must be drunk once." Emma Marsland, yonder plain-looking English girl, who is eating cakes and drinking afternoon coffee under the shadow of the lindens, is drunk to-day! She shows, I must admit, few outward signs by which you could guess at her condition. Emma has been brought up in a school that holds betrayal of feeling as a forfeiture of the sex's dignity. Hers, too, is a face not destined by nature to be the index of the soul. But still, for all her calm exterior, the wine of life runs warm and tingling through her veins; the joyfullest cup we any of us taste, from our birth to our burying, is at her lips. Emma Marsland loves, and believes herself to be loved in return. For one day—as likely as not one only, out of a perfectly sober, commonplace life—every beat of the little heiress's heart, every breath she draws, is intoxication.

"How good the coffee always is abroad, mamma." Not very poetic; but this is what she says, not what she thinks. "And the kuchen" (Emma has learnt German for seven years in Chalkshire, and pronounces the word coo-ken) "so crisp and short, better even than we got on the Rhine. I wonder whether they put much butter in them?"

"I should hope not, for your sake, Emmy," remarks a masculine voice at her side. "The dish was brought out, full, a minute ago, and you and mother have pretty nearly emptied it already."

"Oh, Rawdon, what a shame! Mamma, do you hear what Rawdon accuses us of?" And poor Emma laughs and laughs again, a rather tittering little school-girl laugh, at Rawdon's exquisite stroke of humour. "You are glad enough to get your own sherry-and-bitters of an afternoon—you know you are, Rawdon, and you ought to be content, and not envy mamma

they take the place of five o'clock tea to us now we are abroad?"

"Do they?" returns Rawdon, in the absent tone of a man who does not know a word he is saying. "La, la, la, la, lira . . . . . ." He follows, half aloud, the opening bars of the distant waltz music, then is seized with a mighty yawn, which he strives gallantly, but in vain, to stifle in its birth; and then he crosses his arms, pulls his hat a little over his eyes, gazes up at as much blue sky as the lindens leave visible, and begins to whistle.

He is bored, poor young fellow, but unconsciously; takes no livelier interest in Emmy and the dead level of Emmy's small talk than he has done any time during his twenty-two years of life, but is unaware of his lack of interest. If his mother would allow him to smoke he would be happier than he is, doubtless; and if his mother and Emma would retire to their own apartments in the hotel, and leave him and his father to their newspapers and their pipes, he would be happier still.

Other anarchy is there none in Rawdon Crosbie's spirit. And yet all the combustible materials wanted for rebellion are ready stored there, waiting only the chance spark that shall kindle them into a flame. Does not every day's experience show us that this slumbering, negative, acquiescent kind of discontent is the very symptom of all others that tells surest when men's hearts are ripe for revolt?

I have spoken at length of Jane Theobald; let me give a few words to the group of English people who are drinking their coffee beneath her window—the Chalkshire neighbours, who are to be Jane's enemies, or friends, her monitors or her executioners, as fate may elect.

Mrs. Crosbie was a noted beauty in her youth. She is fifty years old now, but has not forgotten the trick of smile, the turn of head, the downcast bend of the eyelids, which were her strong points when she was the "beautiful Juliana Hervey." The beautiful Juliana Hervey who, after a dozen seasons' fruitless title-hunting, bestowed herself at eight-and-twenty upon Mr. Crosbie, a country gentleman of small means, smaller pretensions, and without a connection in the world worth mentioning. She is dressed always by the first milliner of her part of Chalkshire, adopts with unflinching courage whatever she believes to be the latest fashion of the day, and at the present moment wears a dress, bonnet, and shawl, each undeniable of its kind, but the sum total of whose effect absolutely sets your teeth on edge with its cruel discordancy. Were you to talk to Mrs. Crosbie of dress as of a thing relative rather than final, hint to her of subtle combinations of colour, of artistic license, of subduing fashion to the age and complexion of each particular votary, I think she would at once have doubts as to the correctness of your moral character. All the best people about Lidlington employ the same milliner, as they consult the same doctor, attend the same church, best people of the neighbourhood supply the cue, either to her thoughts, words, or actions, Mrs. Crosbie's conscience is at rest. She is a woman who never moves out of the safe and narrow groove of class prejudice. She knows, and wants to know, nothing about the abstract truth of things. She wants only to dress and dine, calumniate and pray, die and be buried as a woman belonging by birth to the Landed Gentry of her country should, and is content to debit Providence with the results.

Young Rawdon Crosbie, aged twenty-two years, and a lieutenant in Her Majesty's regiment of artillery, is a fair average specimen of his nation and class. Across his broad forehead is the genuine "gunner sunmark," or insignia of his craft; his limbs, displayed by one of those knickerbocker costumes which our countrymen love to wear upon their travels, bear witness to the beneficial results of seven years' classical training on the heights of Harrow. His face is an honest red-and-brown Englishman's face, by no means handsome in its present unfledged condition, but giving you an impression that it may become even strikingly so a few years later on. The head, with its close-shorn black hair, is compact and solid, not precisely an intellectual-looking head, and yet a head that looks "full of brains," fuller of them indeed than Master Rawdon's speech and actions up to the present time would seem to betoken. He stands a little under six feet in his shooting boots; has never had a heart-ache or a finger-ache since he was born; from his earliest infancy has been trained with the extra scrupulousness usually bestowed upon only sons, and is now destined to marry an heiress! In all respects, one may say, he is a young fellow with whom the world goes well, and to whom more than his share of the world's goods have fallen.

Mr. Crosbie, a middle-aged gentleman with square, grey whiskers, a resigned, fresh-complexioned face, and no very particular features to speak of, sits dutifully guiding his opinions by the *Times*, at his wife's side; and between him and Rawdon, and immediately opposite the dish of kuchen, is Emma Marsland.

I have already broken to the reader that Emma is plain. Let me soften that worst indictment that can be brought against any young woman in the position of a heroine, by adding that she has thirty thousand pounds. A girl with thirty thousand pounds can surely afford to do without the foolish carnation hues and sparkling eyes, which, to penniless maidens, are the all-in-all of existence. Her hair—well, I wish to speak tenderly of everything belonging to poor Emmy, so we will call her hair auburn. Her skin is of the peculiar dead waxen whiteness that goes with the auburn type of colouring; and it is a skin that freckles. Her eyes are dark sienna brown; the brows and eyelashes so much fairer than her hair as to be all but invisible. Were you to analyse her other features, you would, I think, find them correct

(correcter, certainly, than Jane Theobald's). But what man analyses when he has to pass his verdict upon a girl's face? Emma generally gets a sufficiency of partners at the Chalkshire balls; but no man, Rawdon included, dances more than his one or two set duty dances with her. Everyone likes Emma. Everyone has a favourable word to say for her. She is unaffected, amiable to excess, dances fairly well considering her low stature and her plumpness. But no man asks her for more than his duty dances, and no man, despite the thirty thousand pounds, has ever envied Rawdon his future lot as her husband.

Like her adopted mother, Emma is dressed by the first milliner in Chalkshire, and with not dissimilar results. Deep, reddish-pink ribbons, for instance, predominate in her attire to-day. Well, Rawdon, of course, has not much practical knowledge of aught pertaining to women's dress, still some glimmering, some intuitive sense of artistic propriety is in his soul, and every time he glances at Emma this sense is disturbed. Sunshine is good, and rose-coloured ribbons are good, and so, in a mediæval picture, is flame-coloured hair. But the three in juxtaposition—a tri-coloured glory round the face of a young person who has just devoured a plate of buttery cakes in five minutes!

Poor Rawdon! Whenever he is away from Emma he believes, vaguely, that he is very much indeed in love. And whenever he is at her side he knows definitely that he is not in love at all!

This is a contradictory, but by no means uncommon condition of the human heart; and one well worth the study of those curious in such matters.

"Juliana, my dear," says Mr. Crosbie, looking at his wife across his newspaper, "who do you think that Englishman we saw this morning turns out to be? Our scapegrace neighbour, Francis Theobald. I was sure something about his face was familiar to me. He is here in this very hotel."

Mrs. Crosbie gives a rebellious fold of her silken skirts a furtive little admonition with one shapely finger; "Mr. Francis Theobald in this hotel? Dear, dear, how inopportune! Is he," lowering her voice, as if she had just in time remembered Emma's presence—"is he alone?"

"I'm sure I don't know. No, I suppose his wife is with him. I saw him on the stairs afterwards, and he had a little girl in his arms."

"A little girl! Ah, I think I *do* recollect hearing. . . . It makes it additionally painful."

Mrs. Crosbie looks unutterable things, and Rawdon asks for an explanation. Does "it" mean Theobald, or the hotel, or meeting Theobald in the hotel, and who is especially to be pained by the *mal-à-propos* existence of a little girl?

"Rawdon, you know how much I dislike this sort of idle joking," answers Mrs. Crosbie, gravely. "Mr. Francis Theobald, as you are aware, will before long be our nearest neighbour in Chalkshire."

"Yes, mother."

"Well, if you force me to speak of such things in Emma's presence, you must know—anyone with proper feeling must know that our position as regards him and—his—household will be *most* delicate. Emma, my dear, what is that splendid scarlet creeper, yonder, round the trellis-work? It would be just the sort of grower we want for the corner of the poultry-house."

"Scarlet runners," says Rawdon, decisively. "Don't move, Emmy," laying his brown hand on Emma Marsland's white one. "You are only to be sent out of the way because we happen to be talking of improper subjects. Mother, by-the-by," turning round with an air of suddenly-awakened interest to Mrs. Crosbie, "why are the Theobalds an improper subject, and why is our position with regard to them delicate? In spite of Emma's presence we may surely discuss this?"

Rawdon is argumentative by nature. By the time he was five years old he was wont to fold his small arms when opposed, and calmly dispute first principles with poor Mrs. Crosbie.

"It is not a question for discussion at all, Rawdon. It is a question of what everybody in the neighbourhood will do. A question of duty."

"Duty. Well, now, I can't see that. The Theobalds are as old a family as there is in Chalkshire, and Theobald, from what men say of him, is not at all a bad sort of fellow, bar gambling. As for his wife, if she had not been a pretty woman and a nice woman, you may depend upon it he wouldn't have married her. And a pretty woman and a nice woman must be an acquisition to Lidlington society."

"But all that has nothing to do with our duty. However much we may pity the position of Mr. Theobald's sisters, however much we may wish well to his . . . wife," the word comes laggingly, as under protest, from Mrs. Crosbie's lips, "the question for us all will be, 'Ought we to visit her?'"

"Of course in olden days these little social difficulties were settled more comfortably," says Rawdon. "Within this century French actors were not even allowed Christian burial. But now, when every one goes everywhere! Why, mother, don't you know the houses of some of our first-rate actors are allowed to be the pleasantest in London?—houses everybody tries to get invited to, and——"

"I know nothing of the kind, Rawdon. Mrs. Coventry Brown told me (for, alas! the subject had to be discussed as soon as we all heard *who* was coming among us), Mrs. Coventry Brown told me that this Mrs. Theobald's sister is at the present time a very poor actress at one of the minor theatres, and that her uncle plays the trombone—yes, the trombone, Rawdon, in the orchestra of the Theatre Royal. Is this, can this be a person with whom you would desire Emma to associate?"

Before Rawdon can answer, Mr. Crosbie unexpectedly looks up again from his *Times*, and speaks. After being the husband for three-and-twenty years of a woman whom he acknowledges and whom the world acknowledges to be his superior, Mr. Crosbie has naturally become a man of few words. What he says when he does speak, however, is pretty nearly always to the point.

"Do we know anything against this Mrs. Francis Theobald's moral character, Juliana, either before or since her marriage?"

"Moral character? Really, Mr. Crosbie, I must ask you not to make use of such strong expressions before Emma."

"Because, if we do not—and as we do visit Lady Rose Golightly, my dear—I think we might express ourselves with a little more charity. Francis Theobald's father—poor old George!—and I were schoolboys together," goes on Mr. Crosbie stoutly, "and whatever you ladies may do, I shall certainly not turn the cold shoulder on George's son, spendthrift and gambler though they say the man has become."

"Ah, gentlemen, happily for themselves, can act with independence in these matters," says Mrs. Crosbie, again rebuking a contumacious fold of her dress. "Mr. Francis Theobald, I have no doubt, in the hunting field and all other places where gentlemen see each other, will never meet with anything to remind him of his painful domestic position."

"And Mrs. Theobald is to be reminded of it alo " cries Emmy, who has at last finished her cakes and coffee. "Mamma, is this justice? Mr. Theobald is not to be punished for being the husband of an actress, and Mrs. Theobald *is* to be punished for being the wife of a gentleman."

"And it must be remembered that Mrs. Theobald never was an actress at all," puts in Rawdon, looking approvingly at Emma. "She was in training, or so they say, for a dancer, and Theobald ran off with her before she ever appeared in public. If we are to be punished for what we might have been, heaven help us all!"

"It is a question, simply and wholly, of duty, of what society owes to itself," says Mrs. Crosbie, going back, as is her invariable custom when Rawdon argues with her, to her original starting point. "This young person, coming from a different station to our own, and being accidentally transplanted into our neighbourhood, ought we, remembering what is due to ourselves and others, to visit her? This is the question society will have to decide, and until it is decided, we as individuals must take the greatest care not to form an opinion, or an acquaintance that may hereafter be compromising. Emma, love, we really must ascertain the name of that creeper before we leave Spa."

Now, oddly enough, all this kindly chat as to Mrs. Theobald's impending ostracism has been taking place in the hotel courtyard at the very time when Mrs. Theobald and her husband are holding *their* little domestic discussion within doors. When Mrs. Crosbie began, "It is a question, simply and wholly, of duty," Jane had reached the trenchant declaration of "War to the knife!" While Mrs. Crosbie was proceeding with her exordium, Jane was flying, two steps at a time, down the hotel staircase. Finally, just at the moment Mrs. Crosbie finished speaking, Jane, in all the dazzling freshness of her summer dress, and wearing the celebrated blue bonnet, emerged from the hotel door, n a half-a-dozen paces from the spot where the party of her future neighbours were sitting.

"It must be the Princess," whispers Emma, eagerly. "Mamma—Rawdon, look! It must be the Princess."

The great Russian Princess Czartoriska (*née*—nobody knows of what people, or of what clime) happens to be now staying in the Hotel Bellevue, and Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are already well posted as to the number of her Highness's estates, the magnificence of her diamonds, the profound impression produced by her toilettes, her prodigality and her reckless play wheresoever she travels. For Mrs. Crosbie's Chalkshire maid is a pretty girl, and the Princess has a good-looking courier, speaking all languages. And on a fine June evening what more natural, when the families are at dinner, than that pretty girls and good-looking couriers should exchange a word in the court yard or on the staircase of the hotel? Emma and Mrs. Crosbie, I say, know these things already. They are not fonder of gossip, perhaps, than most country ladies of respectable position and perfectly unemployed minds; but they are fond, very fond, of it. And must not the smallest details, virtuous or the reverse, of a princely life be as nectar always to a well-regulated English mind? So when Emma, misled by the elegance of Jane's dress, whispers the word "Princess," visions of all her Highness's jewels and toilettes—visions, even, as to the possibility of becoming acquainted with their owner, rise at once before Mrs Crosbie's soul.

"Your hat—remove your hat, Charles," she whispers, in a quick aside to her husband.

Mr. Crosbie looks up, his finger still marking his place on a leading article, and, seeing a pretty young woman stand before him, encircled by blue and white muslin, does as he is bidden without hesitation, Rawdon following suit. Jane, never suspecting the presence of the enemy, gives a smile that shows her white teeth to perfection, accompanying it with a little professional salutation learnt long ago from poor old Adolphe Dido, the ballet-master of the Theatre Royal, and floats on.

"And bonnets are worn small, after all," says Emma. "And what a different shape to ours!"

"My dear Emma," returns Mrs. Crosbie, "our bonnets were the fashion six weeks ago, Miss Fletcher assured me so, and I have never had cause to doubt Fletcher's integrity. But in the position, with the wealth of the Princess, every new caprice from headquarters can be adopted, as a matter of course."

"And she wears shoes and buckles! I wish I had a foot that looked well in shoes."

"She is an uncommonly pretty woman," says Mr. Crosbie, in his admiration of Jane actually forgetting to go back to his paper. "Looks remarkably young, too; and yet the Princess Czartoriska—why, if it's the same woman who was over in London in '65, she must be forty if she's a day!"

"I wonder if it is the Princess at all?" suggested Rawdon. "Before we go into any more raptures, let us be sure the lovely being is not her Highness's lady's-maid."

But neither Mrs. Crosbie nor Emma will entertain a doubt on this point. Especially is Mrs. Crosbie sure that they have received a friendly bow and smile from *son Altesse*, and no other. The grace, the distinction, the mien! Mrs. Crosbie might mistake in some things; she is not likely—the instincts of a Hervey are not likely—to err as regards these attributes of breeding and high birth.

"Then, suppose, Emmy, you and I go after her Highness, in the hope of getting another bow?" says Rawdon, jumping up, and with his eyes still following Jane. "We'll come back for you, by-and-by, mother; and, mind, if we get acquainted with the wrong person, if our gracious friend turns out to be the lady's-maid, not the mistress, you will be to blame."

And, so speaking, away Master Rawdon strolls from the courtyard into the street, Emma Marsland trotting, obedient as a little spaniel, at his heels.

"How well everything has turned out!" Mrs. Crosbie remarks, in a thanksgiving tone, as she looks after them.

"I beg your pardon, my dear. Who did you say had turned out well?"

"The plans, the hopes of my life, Mr. Crosbie. Emma is twenty-one, her own mistress, to-day, and see—see the terms on which she and our Rawdon stand!"

A motion of Mrs. Crosbie's hand points in the direction which the two young people have taken. A moment ago they were side by side, but, exactly as she speaks, the airy blue-and-white figure of "the Princess," who has been stopping behind to look into a shop window, chances to divide them—an omen Mrs. Crosbie may, perhaps, remember later on. "I do hope, Charles, we shall make that *sweet* Princess's acquaintance," she remarks, almost with fervour.

"I hope it will profit us if we do make it, Juliana. A foreign princess reminds me more than I like of a foreign archduke, and the only time I ever knew an archduke was at Boulogne——"

"And he borrowed twenty pounds of us, and turned out not to be an archduke at all," interrupts Mrs. Crosbie, reddening. "I pretend to no superhuman sagacity, Mr. Crosbie. I confess that I have been deceived by an impostor once in my life. What has that got to do with the Princess Czartoriska?"

"Nothing, nothing, my love. I was foolish to mention it, perhaps; only, as you seemed so squeamish about taking Francis Theobald's wife on trust, I thought you might like to make a few inquiries as to this Russian woman's antecedents too."

"The Princess Czartoriska is received by every crowned head in Europe, Charles. I have seen her name repeatedly among the distinguished guests at different foreign Courts, and she has been presented in London. Would any reasonable being talk about antecedents after that?"

Mr. Crosbie goes on with his leading article.

CHAPTER III

ONLY DONKEYS

The lovers that are to be saunter slowly, meanwhile, along the High Street of Spa, Emma's heart as full of sunshine as the sky above her head, Rawdon in as little lover-like a frame of mind as can well be imagined. He knows perfectly well that before the day is over it is incumbent upon him to make a proposal of marriage to poor expectant Emma. He hopes that, somehow or another, he will be able to pull through it. But he is not elated. Of course he will get accustomed in time to being engaged, and even married. But the proposal—what is he to say, what can he say that Emmy does not very well know already? Why is it not the custom for people to become engaged off-hand without going through any ridiculous preliminary form of proposal and acceptance at all?

When Emma Marsland, an orphan at seven years of age, was first left to Mr. Crosbie's guardianship, nothing could be more admirable, more disinterested, than the sentiments given forth to the world by Mrs. Crosbie. She might, indeed, have wished that this additional responsibility, this sacred charge, had been spared her. She might have wished, for her Rawdon's sake, that the unexpected addition to her cares had been a boy, in which case the children could have pursued their studies together. Still, a trust was a trust—a duty a duty. Under heaven's blessing, Mrs. Crosbie would bring up poor little Emmy with as much care, as much love, as though she were indeed her Rawdon's sister. And faithfully, it must be added, was the promise carried out. Few girls in Chalkshire had had a better education than Emma Marsland. None had been more diligently counselled by maternal wisdom as to the paths wherein they should tread.

That the auburn-haired heiress and her thirty thousand pounds were destined, in Mrs. Crosbie's mind, for Rawdon from the earliest days when the children lived together under the same roof, is, perhaps, only to say that Mrs. Crosbie

was mortal. But on this point as on all others, she behaved in strictest accordance with the ruling principles of her life. "I do not say that you will never make Emma your wife," she used to tell young Rawdon, while he was still at school. "If, when the tastes of both are matured, your boy-and-girl attachment should remain unchanged, I do not even deny that my fondest hopes would be realised by such a union. Meanwhile, never forget that you must act with the utmost delicacy in the matter. To extract, nay, to permit, a promise from a young girl placed as our dear Emma is placed, would expose you and all of us to an imputation of mercenary motives in the eyes of the world. On the day when Emma is twenty-one, and if she has made no other choice in the meantime, you may speak. Until then, remember she is not only our daughter—that she will always be, whatever happens—but your sister."

And Rawdon, rigidly virtuous, poor fellow, in the absence of temptation, had obeyed his mother's injunctions to the letter. He had never hinted, and never wished to hint, one word of love to Emma Marsland. Love! why even the boy-and-girl attachment at which Mrs. Crosbie hinted was, Rawdon knew in his heart, a myth. He liked her, of course, poor little patient jog-trot Emma, as he must have liked any young creature that had lived under the same roof with him, and made itself his slave. She was invincibly stupid with her fingers; could never learn to splice a line, or make a fly, as some girls could; was a muff at everything to do with horses; too stout of limb and short of breath to fag out even, as some fellows' sisters could, at cricket. Still, she was so perseveringly affectionate, so implacably sweet-tempered under bullying or neglect, that Rawdon could not but like her. "Who in the world could *dis*like Emma?" he would say, as the strongest encomium that could be passed upon her. And probably in his own words could be found the most exact exposition of his feelings. He found it impossible to *dis*like her.

Not a very near approach this to the sentiment of love. But Rawdon, up to the hour of which I write, knew no more than the majority of lads of his age of sentiment of any kind. A pair of keen young eyes were in his head; young blood was in his veins; every pretty girl he met—yes, if he met a dozen in the same walk, occasioned him a quickening of the pulse very pleasant to experience. This was all. He was rather shy with ladies if the truth must be told; held aloof in ballrooms—although he loved dancing with a passion—had never, as far as Chalkshire knew, had an affair of the heart in his life. And, then, on the day on which she was twenty-one he was to propose to Emma Marsland! Every one, Emma included, knew this perfectly, and the result was that Rawdon, like all men engaged or married too young, was just a little crushed.

He had young eyes in his head, young blood in his veins; and there were plenty of pretty women, there was plenty of pleasure, of love-making, of delight in the world. And he stood apart from it all. He was to marry Emma Marsland. The uncertainty, the aroma, the sparkling taste of life were wanting to the lad before he, in reality, knew what life was. His household duties were set and sealed for him as are those of royalty. Romance, the possibility of romance as connected with himself, existed not. He was to marry Emma Marsland.

Such had been Rawdon Crosbie's frame of mind for the last two years. It was his frame of mind on this, Emma's twenty-first birthday—the day on which they were to become formally betrothed lovers—the day on which fate had appointed him to make the acquaintance of Jane Theobald.

They walk side by side along the street, the blue and white draperies of "the Princess" fluttering about three yards ahead of them.

"Her dress is stylishly made, but cheap, very cheap, when one comes to look at it near," thinks Emma.

"She has a perfect figure," thinks Rawdon. "And her ankle—by Jove, if that woman is forty, or within fifteen years of forty, I'll——"

His meditations are cut short by Emma's voice, a high-pitched piping voice, such as not unfrequently belongs to people of her complexion. "What a dear little path up to the right, Rawdon! I should like so much to go up that little path to the right!"

"Why not go, then?" is Rawdon's inevitable answer.

And in another minute he and Emma, out of sight of man, are climbing up one of those steep over-arched pathways by which, at every turn, you can escape out of the village of Spa into the cool, still greenness of the wooded hillside.

Of Rawdon, as of Malcolm Græme, a poet might sing:

"Straight up Ben Lomond could he press,
Yet not a sob his toil confess!"

But mountaineering is not an exercise for which nature has fitted Emma Marsland. Before they have scrambled a hundred yards the poor little thing is breathless, panting, clutching at her companion's stout arm, and warmer—oh, warmer far, than any heroine of a love scene should ever be!

Things being so, Rawdon considerately suggests that they shall rest awhile, and down on the mossy sward Emma sinks, recovering her breath and her complexion as best she can.

Rawdon sits down too.

The birds are singing among the boughs, the spot is lonely; the sweet wild scent of lusty woodland spring is in the air.

Now, thinks Rawdon, is the time to propose.

He gazes steadfastly away down a sun-tinted vista among the trees, listens to the birds, listens to the far-off music in the avenue, drinks in the June air, a love-philter of itself, and the thing seems easy to do. He turns, full of courage, looks straight into Emma's face—and begins to whistle.

"How funny it seems to be so far from home on my birthday," she remarks, placidly. "I hope the school children are enjoying their treat. I hope the buns aren't as heavy as they were last year."

The Sunday school at Lidlington is, next to Rawdon, Emma's object in existence, and always on her birthday a great affair of bun-cake, prizes, and tea goes on in the village. Rawdon, poor fellow! entertains towards tea feasts and Sunday schools generally the natural instincts of his sex and age, but the speech reminds him of Emmy's kind heart, charitable dispositions, admirable suitability to the country and domestic life. And with a kind of rush he comes to the point thus:

"Emma, my dear ——"

"Yes, Rawdon?"

"I hope you don't wish yourself back in Lidlington already, Emma?"

"Not for good. I wouldn't miss Brussels for anything. Mamma and I are going to get a dress each, and a bonnet (I shall get a blue one like the Princess's) in Brussels. But I should like to be back just for ten minutes to give the prizes, and see the children properly set to their tea. Miss Finch is all very well in school-time, but I don't know how she'll get on alone at a treat; besides, I should like to be *sure* that the buns aren't heavy."

"Emma"—but his voice trembles—oh, it is, it is difficult—"I think sometimes your whole heart and soul are centred in Lidlington!"

She looks at him, she knows what is coming, and turns crimson from forehead to chin. An emotion she cannot master holds her dumb. It is the supreme, enraptured moment of her life—this terribly difficult, emotionless moment to Rawdon Crosbie.

"How would you like to live"—an involuntary sigh escapes him—"to live always in Lidlington! I mean, when we are elderly people, like my father and mother?"

"Why Rawdon—what a question! You know I should like it. You know I always mean to remain with mamma."

"Dear Emma!" This last remark he feels has smoothed matters beautifully. Remaining with mamma seems, after all, to involve so very slight a change in their present position towards each other. "My dear Emma——"

And then Rawdon's eloquence comes to an abrupt full stop, and rather spasmodically he puts his arm round Emmy's waist, and kisses her.

He has been in the habit of doing so, fraternally, every morning and night since the day when they first lived together as little children. There is, therefore, no reason why this particular kiss should form any new standing-point in their existence. Yet each feels that it has done so.

"It is over," thinks Rawdon. "Thank God! It is over."

What Emma thinks could not be put into words so easily. She is as commonplace a woman as ever lived; but she is a woman, and she loves Rawdon from the depths of her heart, and these first moments, doubtless, to her are as ecstatic as though she were a beauty and a genius. Dandelions and potato-flowers are probably as glad of the spring as are violets and primroses, if we knew the truth.

The lowering sun warms all the woodland vistas with richer yellow; the gnats pursue each other, amatively circling overhead; the small birds sing in the boughs. Love is abroad, quickening the pulse of all creation, this June afternoon.

Rawdon Crosbie, a lover of a minute old, wonders what the mischief he shall say next.

Love-making, in the common acceptation of the word, would be simply ridiculous between him and Emmy. He has too much delicate sympathy for the earnestness of *her* feelings to begin talking on indifferent subjects. Fortunately she solves the difficulty for him.

"I wonder what mamma will say when—when we tell her all about our walk!"

The remark is so comprehensive, and at the same time so vague, that Rawdon "blesses her unaware." He has spoken, has spoken definitely, as it was always intended he should speak, on Emmy's twenty-first birthday, and she understands him, and is happy. Surely things may remain in this comfortable but unacknowledged position for the present.

"Is it necessary always to tell mamma, verbatim, where you have been and what you have said, Emma? Couldn't you and I keep a secret for one month, well, for one week, then, to ourselves?"

She hesitates, not quite knowing whether a clandestine engagement would be wrong, but very certain indeed that it would be pleasant.

"Do just as you like," says Rawdon, watching her face.

"I like what you like," is Emma's answer, as she glances back at him affectionately. "You must decide everything for me now."

"My dear little Emmy! You have always been the best, the kindest——"

But just as things have reached this tender point, just as Rawdon Crosbie, carried away by feeling—that he feels nothing, is on the brink of becoming loverlike in earnest, a cavalcade of donkeys, ridden by foreign ladies and gentlemen in picturesque equestrian dress, and with a great flourishing of whips, breaks in abruptly upon the scene. The cavalcade passes on in due time, but not until Emma has sustained a dreadful fright from the whole herd of donkeys "trying to run over her," as she calls it; while Rawdon, hot and indignant, has had to shoulder a parasol and stand between his beloved and danger.

"You do make yourself so confoundedly ridiculous, Emma," he remarks, the amenities of sentiment rapidly merging back into fraternal straightforwardness when they are again alone.

"Yes, but, Rawdon, why should they all begin—I know it was down hill—but why

should the nasty things all begin running just when they came near me? Oh, 'only donkeys!' It's very fine for *you* to say 'only donkeys,'" and Emma is very near crying, "but I say I don't want to be killed by a runaway horrid donkey, any more than by a horse."

What man, after such an episode, could revert to love-making? Not Rawdon Crosbie. He recovers his temper, of course, and begins to "chaff" Emma, just as he used in the old schoolboy days, about her cowardice; and, as long as they are in the woods, she hangs betrothed-fashion upon his arm—in one steepest part of the descent, even transfers her hand for a single, thrilling, delightful instant to his shoulder. But love-making! Rawdon feels that all the love-making his fate can possibly entail upon him is finished and done with. He has proposed—well, has made himself understood—and Emmy is contented, and nothing more remains to be said on the subject. As far as he is concerned, love-making is a thing over and done with for ever in this life.

A pretty numerous crowd has gathered round the military band by the time they get back to the village, seeing which Rawdon proposes that Miss Marsland shall stroll slowly on in the direction of the promenade while he runs back to the Hotel Bellevue for his mother.

"Don't be long, Rawdon," cries Emma, before he has got a couple of paces away. "And be sure you return, too." Experience has taught her what risk there is of losing Rawdon altogether when once she trusts him out of her sight. "Now, promise that you will return, too?"

"Don't make me promise too much, Emmy," says Rawdon, looking back. "If I meet the Princess, and she gives me another bow, I won't undertake to answer for what will become of me."

"Take care what you say, sir! If you think so much about the Princess Czartoriska, I shall be jea——"

But Rawdon is out of hearing; and Emma, with a sensation of treading on air rather than on solid ground, pursues her way alone down the pleasant shaded road towards the avenue.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCESS CZARTORISKA

Scarcely has she reached the outskirts of the crowd, when a succession of infantile shrieks disturbs the decorum of the promenade: another minute, and Miss Marsland finds herself "assisting" at a combat of the most determined, albeit unequal nature. On one side a stalwart Belgian nurse, her hair and cap disordered, her face inflamed with passion; on the other a bright-cheeked, furious little morsel of an English baby some two or three years of age.

The original cause of dispute, as in the case of most wars, seems to be forgotten by both belligerents in the present heat and fervour of the fray. Brandishing her charge aloft, and conscious at least of superior physical force, the nurse is bodily bearing the enemy back in the direction of the village, while a shower of blows, neither weak nor ill-directed, fall upon her broad red face, and a volley of such abuse as the infant tongue is capable of—half German, half English, half Belgian patois—is brought to bear upon her moral sense.

Emma Marsland pauses, half amused, half sorry for this poor little plucky British rebel held in durance by the foreigner; and the child, instinctively scenting an ally, stretches forth its arms in her direction.

"Mamsey—me want mein Mamsey!" is its piteous entreaty. And upon this Emma stops outright, and going up to the nurse asks, in as good French as she can command, what ails the little one?

The reply, to English ears at least, is unintelligible; but a rent that the nurse points out in the child's elaborately embroidered frock, and recent gravel marks on the palms of its little rosy hands, tell their own story of the nature of its crime. While the "brave Belge" amused herself by gazing at some good-looking bandsman, the child had fallen down, and was now being carried home in grief and disgrace for punishment.

"Poor little thing! I don't suppose she could help it," says Emma, good-naturedly.

"No, no," the child repeats, in its broken accents. "Me touldn't help it. Bossy touldn't help it."

And then, with one swift rush, she frees herself from the nurse's arms, and seeks the side of her new ally, from which position, clutching Emma's skirts tight, she looks back, with all the flush of victory upon her small face, at the foe.

A rose-bud bit of mischief of three is Blossy Theobald—a bit of mischief delightfully redolent of soap-and-water, fresh air, and health; long eye-lashed, with teeth like tiny pearls, dimpled hands that she has a pretty trick of clasping, the fingers outspread, like one of Vandyck's portrait children, upon her chest; heaven-blue eyes, that look you through and through with the conscious superiority of her age, and assurance—ah! Blossy's assurance, like other of her moral qualities, is a thing to be experienced, not written about.

Mistress in a moment of the situation, she briefly remarks, "Bossy go back," and forthwith, still holding Miss Marsland's dress, turns her small steps again in the direction of the music, the nurse following. Here, then, is Emma Marsland, Mrs. Crosbie's daughter of adoption, trepanned into an intimate acquaintance with Jane Theobald's child! Before three minutes are over Blossy has unfolded all the domestic joys and sorrows of her life. She loves Mamsey. and Dada, and her doll Nancy. And which

best? All best. Well, if that cannot be, Nancy. Only Nancy has a broken nose, and her paint is off.

"Then I suppose Nancy is about as pretty as I am?" asks Emma, who, like most very plain people, is sensitive overmuch on the subject of her own personal appearance.

Blossy looks up, showing her white teeth and wrinkling her nose as she scrutinises Emma's features, but makes no direct answer. "Madame got pitty zings," she remarks at last, pointing to a little bunch of charms—golden, substantial charms—that hangs from Emma's watch-chain. "And me like pitty zings—me *do*."

If the compliment savours of mercenariness, it also displays a ready tact, a fertility of resource, which many an older person might not, on the moment, have found to their hand. Miss Marsland stoops and kisses the small speaker on the lips. Just then—boum, boum, begins the drum-beat which is to herald in a lively set of military quadrilles. Blossy listens to the first three bars, then, finding the music of a quality that pleases her, lifts her embroidered frock between her two pink thumbs and fore-fingers, poises her right toe aloft, in true professional fashion, and begins to dance.

A prettier picture it would be hard to imagine than Blossy, dancing improvised ballets of her own beneath green trees, her gipsy-hat falling upon her shoulders, her yellow curls bare in the sun. She smiles, coquettes, raises one dimpled arm above her head; she pirouettes, she fantasias. Emma, already enamoured of the whole world that Rawdon's declaration has dyed rose-coloured, grows more and more fascinated by the little creature as she stands and watches her. When, but not until, the band has ceased playing, does Blossy cease to dance. Then, after kissing the tips of her fingers to some imaginary audience, she returns gravely to the examination of Miss Marsland's trinkets.

"And who taught you to dance so well?" asks Emma, leading the child apart and sitting down with her upon a bench.

"No one taughted me," says Miss Theobald, in her dialect. "Mamsey dance, and Auntie Min, and Bossy dance too."

"And what is your name? *Bossy Teaball?*—oh, but that's nonsense. I mean your real name."

"Bossy Teaball, and Auntie Min, and Mamsey, and Dada," repeats the child, evidently determined to go through the family nomenclature exhaustively. "And Bossy like pitty zings!" This with great pathos and sincerity, and clasping the whole bunch of Miss Marsland's trinkets between her two small hands.

To pleading like this there can be but one result. When is the combination of a sweet tongue, a fair face, and a mercenary heart aught but successful? Among Emma's toys is a silver fish, with emerald eyes, ruby gills, and flexible tail, that Blossy singles out, by unmistakable signs of admiration, from among its fellows; and, before another minute has passed, the fish is detached from Emma's chain and in Blossy's possession. The child jumps, dances, sings with delight, kisses her new treasure, hugs it, as little children do, with rapture to her breast.

"Mamsey, mamsey!" she cries out at last, "mamsey see!" and away flies Blossy, the nurse in pursuit, towards a lady who at this moment approaches by a side-walk, immediately in face of the bench where Miss Marsland is sitting.

It is the Princess Czartoriska! Emma Marsland recognises the blue and white dress, the affable smile, the aristocratic tread, at a glance; and her heart beats pleasurably. Her Highness draws near—ought she to sit still or stand up? Emma feels it must be best to err on the side of over-deference, so stands up. And thus standing, and colouring almost as red as her own hair, waits, while Blossy, volubly explaining her adventure, drags her mother along by the skirts to introduce her to the owner of the "pitty zings."

"I am afraid my little girl has been giving you a great deal of trouble." What singularly good English the Princess speaks! But then, remembers Emma, the Russians are notably the best linguists extant. And how entirely without state are her manners! But simplicity, Emma has always heard, is a special attribute of real greatness. "Bloss, what do you say to this lady for being so kind to you?"

"She got pitty zings," answers Bloss, looking up wickedly from beneath her eyelashes.

"Wherever that child goes, she makes friends," proceeds her Highness, Emma remaining silent from pure humility. "I never saw anything like it. And she picks all their pockets. Yesterday she came home with a little box of bonbons that some old gentleman or other had given her."

What an absence, what a marvellous absence of pride in all this; Emma stammers out something about her fondness for children, and this particular child's wit and beauty. Such grace, such elegance of movement, too! Emma hopes before many minutes to have the delight of watching her dance again.

"Ah, not much wonder she can dance," says the Princess. "Are you sitting here—thanks," accepting, as a little diffident gesture of Emma's invites her to do, the vacant place on the bench. "Not much wonder she can dance; that's an heirloom."

"Yes, I believe all foreign nations dance better than we English do," remarks Emma, meaning the speech to be a delicately flavoured compliment.

"It's the fashion to say so," answers her Highness, not without warmth. "For my part I think the reverse. Just look at the meagre, dark-skinned French women the managers bring over sometimes! They are agile, certainly, so are monkeys; but put them beside a troupe—mix them, as I've often seen done, in the same piece with a troupe of ordinary English ballet-girls—and see where they are, as far as beauty

goes, and in these days beauty, for the ballet, is everything."

"I don't know much about theatres," says Emma, feeling duly ashamed of her ignorance, "and I've seen very little of the Continent. This is only the second time I've been out of England, and we lead a very quiet life when we are at home, in Chalkshire."

"Chalkshire!" The Princess Czartoriska gives a quick, comprehensive glance at the dress, the face, the roseate locks of her new acquaintance. "And how do you like the Continent when you compare it to Chalkshire?" she asks, quietly.

"Oh, very much for a change. We have been abroad a fortnight, and I have enjoyed all the sight-seeing immensely; but I shouldn't like to live anywhere out of England. I am not sufficient of a linguist to feel at home when I'm abroad. What wonderfully good English your little girl speaks!" Emma goes on, hazarding compliment number two.

"Do you think so? We think she talks all languages equally badly. We roam from one country to another, seeking a resting-place and finding none, and the child, poor morsel, gets a new nurse-girl and a new tongue in each. Last winter we spent in Hombourg, and all she talked was German; now it is Belgian patois. Come here, Bloss." Blossy obeys with the peculiar dancing movement that seems to be her natural way of walking. "Say 'Good-morning' to this lady directly, in French, in German, and in English."

The child goes through this bit of show-off with perfect ease and confidence in her own powers, and Emma's enthusiasm redoubles. . . Ah, how she would like to show the dear little gifted darling to mamma!

"We are staying in the Hotel Bellevue," she finally volunteers, diffident, but hopeful.

"So are we," remarks her Highness.

"And if it would not be too great—too great a liberty—— We shall remain in Spa for a day or two longer, and if I *might* take your sweet little girl in to see mamma——?"

"Thank you, you're very good," says Blossy's mother, the colour deepening in her fresh cheeks. "Of course, I'm always glad when anyone takes a liking to Bloss."

"I asked her to tell me her name just now," goes on Emma, growing bolder; "but the answer was enigmatical. Some pet name, I suppose?"

"Her name is Blossom, a foolish one, isn't it? It was a whim of Theo—— of her father's. She was born in spring, and nothing would do but the baby must be called Blossom. I say it's like a cow. I'm sure the country people in the after-pieces always call their cows Daisy, and Blossom, and all names like that. However, there's no changing it now, and I don't know that I want it changed. It doesn't seem to me anything would suit the child but Blossy."

Emma, secretly wondering, perhaps, at the eccentricities of the great, declares the name of Blossy to be charming. And then the second one? She is too well-bred to ask a direct question, but confesses that Blossy's pronunciation of the second name had been somewhat difficult for her English ear to catch.

"And yet we always think she says her name so well. You must remember her age, only three the second of last April. Bloss, come here, child, and tell your name directly."

Blossy, busy on the ground constructing a sand-lake for the fish to live in, turns round her dimpled pink face, and shows her little milk-white teeth. "Bossy Teaball," she cries, but without offering to move.

"There, I don't know for a baby of three what could be plainer than 'that,'" says the mother, proudly. "Of course, little children never can pronounce the Th."

"Th!" falters Emma, across whose mind an intuition of the horrible truth is breaking. "But her name—your name—does not——!"

"Our name begins with Th," says Jane, with admirable calmness, and looking full into Emma Marsland's face. "Our name is Theobald."

CHAPTER V

FORTUNATELY, THERE ARE RULES

After the first smart of disappointment has passed, Emma Marsland, I must say, behaves herself as well as the burning, the intolerable humiliation of her position permits. She crimsons with very shame, she moves away as far as she can move from the contagion of Jane's blue-and-white muslin, she looks as though she would fain sink into the earth and be hidden from the sight of men. But she is decently civil.

"I have heard . . . I mean I know Mr. Francis Theobald's name well. We shall soon be near neighbours, I hope—that is to say, the Miss Theobalds are old acquaintances of mamma's."

Jane interprets aright every stammering word, every shifting expression of Miss Marsland's face, and smiles maliciously, not offering to help her by a syllable.

"It must be getting late, almost time for me to be going," says Emma, after a minute's uncomfortable silence.

"Oh, won't you stay to hear the next tune?" Jane asks this in the most innocent voice imaginable. "I thought you wanted to see another of Blossy's dances?"

Even as she speaks the band begins to play again, unconscious Blossy to dance. What must Emma do? After extolling at one minute the ravishing graces of the infant Czartoriska, how, under what possible pretext, can she turn her back upon the infant Theobald and her mother at the next! She stays on. By the help of carefully-chosen monosyllables, of ambiguous generalities, even keeps up a show of con-

versation with her newly-made friend. The band plays mercifully loud; the crowd is thick; and Emma is just beginning to hope that she may slip away with no worse mischief established than a bowing acquaintance, which may, or may not, be kept up hereafter in Chalkshire, when lo! not a dozen paces away, appears the sheen of an olive-green dress that Emma recognises but too quickly, and Mrs. Crosbie and Rawdon draw near.

It would be hard to describe Mrs. Crosbie's face on seeing Miss Marsland thus familiarly seated at the Princess's side. No mere vulgar satisfaction, but a tempered, awe-struck serenity overspreads her comely features, an expression that seems to say, "*I* recognised your Highness's birth and breeding at a glance. Your Highness, guided by a like beautiful reciprocity of sentiment, has been drawn towards *me* and mine." Though it is as proud a moment as she has ever experienced in her life, Mrs. Crosbie does not forget—no, not even in approaching a Princess with nineteen quarterings to her shield—that she is a Hervey! one of that race who, while other families boast of counting back their poor thousand years or so, did themselves, according to the Hervey legend, exactly a thousand years ago "leave off counting." And her dignified step, her eye, her whole demeanour are worthy of the occasion.

"Now for the tug of war," thinks her Highness, apprised by Emma that the lady in olive-green is Mrs. Crosbie. "Thank heaven she is not alone though!" And obeying instinct rather than reason, Jane's April-blue eyes direct a shaft at young Rawdon that does its work but too quickly and too effectually on the spot.

Emma looks more and more foolish, Mrs. Crosbie more conscious; Rawdon, taking off his hat very low, looks at Jane: Jane, whatever she may feel, maintains a quiet countenance; Blossy goes on with her pirouetting; the sun who, as we know, has a republican trick of shining on visited and non-visited people alike, slants down his golden benisons upon them all.

Emma is the first to speak. "Mamma," rising, and thereby putting herself so much nearer the means of flight, "did you ever see a little child dance so well? And she's only three, and can talk I don't know how many languages already." Mrs. Crosbie's face bespeaks an almost venerating appreciation of Blossy's surprising talents. "Her mamma has been telling me about her." Without daring to mention names, Emma here goes through a misty pantomine of introduction, upon which Mrs. Crosbie bows very low, and Jane, not rising, bows likewise, Rawdon in the background, meanwhile, standing stiff, his hat between his hands, in an attitude of attention. "Her mamma has been telling me about her. She is only three years old, and—and I have heard her say good morning in English and French and German."

All this Emma hurries out in little spasmodic jerks, and in a voice very unlike her natural one. It is plain, Mrs. Crosbie sees, quite plain, that the dear child is dazed by the proximity, delicious but unwonted, of greatness. Let *her* voice, *her* demeanour show that a Hervey, even in speaking to a princess as nearly allied with royalty as the Princess Czartoriska herself, can feel that she is but addressing a fellow creature and a peer!

"Your Highness is, I trust, like ourselves, visiting this charming retreat for pleasure, not because your Highness's state of health requires the renovating agency of the springs?"

This with eyes downcast, and a reverential air of interest as to the reply delightful to witness.

Crimson with shame, Emma would fain interfere, but the words die on her lips. A look of blankest amazement, followed, an instant later, by one of dawning intelligence, crosses Jane's face.

"I am perfectly well—thanks," she answers, coolly; "and, I'm thankful to say, never tasted a mouthful of any of their atrocious mineral waters in my life."

The perfect English vernacular, a certain comical expression in the Princess's blue eyes, bring Rawdon Crosbie, by a rapid intuition, to the truth, or to so much of the truth as that this blooming English girl of nineteen is not the Princess Czartoriska. But Mrs. Crosbie remains in outer darkness still, and having now abundance of rope at her command, further entangles herself and multiplies the horrors of the situation in this wise:

"We had the pleasure of seeing your Highness this afternoon." Some gesture, fancied surely, on the part of Jane, here seems to invite Mrs. Crosbie to fill the place vacated by Emma, and down Mrs. Crosbie sits. "We were in the courtyard of the Hotel Bellevue——"

Jane gives another glance at Rawdon, which says "I remember."

"In the courtyard of the hotel when your Highness passed out. As my daughter and your charming baby have made acquaintance—might we, *might* we be permitted, living under the same roof, to pay our respects?"

"You are extremely good, I'm sure," says Jane, as Mrs. Crosbie pauses.

"And I shall have the honour of bringing my husband. Rawdon" (Mrs. Crosbie waves her hand to Rawdon to approach), "let me have the honour of presenting my son, an officer in our English artillery, to the Princess Czartoriska."

"The Princess Czartoriska!" cries Jane, the key to the riddle, the motive to the whole farce laid bare by that one word. "The Princess Czartoriska!" And then such a burst of laughter as rings forth from her lips! Well-bred women, I am sure, never laugh like Jane Theobald. But Jane is not well-bred; and to laugh when she is amused comes just as naturally to her healthy spirit as to eat when she is hungered, or to drink when she is athirst.

"I, a princess? I! Oh, I see it all now. And the Princess Czartoriska! Why, she's

forty, and she paints, and she's got the gout!" Each fresh announcement accompanied by such renewed peals of laughter as cause not a few of the nearer spectators to turn round and gaze, open-eyed, at the manners of "these English women."

"And—and I am to understand——" stammers Mrs. Crosbie.

"Mamma, it's all my stupidity!" Emma exclaims, trying hard to steady her voice. "I suppose I could not have said the name distinctly. This lady is—is"—oh, with a wrench she has to bring it out—"is Mrs. Francis Theobald."

For once in her life Mrs. Crosbie forgets her own dignity—the dignity of the Hervey blood—everything. She turns green; she jumps up to her feet, speechless.

Rawdon comes forward with a vast deal more eagerness than he displayed towards "her Highness" a minute since. "Mistake or not, mother," he says, with emphasis, "the accident is a fortunate one, inasmuch as it brings us acquainted with Mrs. Theobald." And as he speaks, the obstinate expression his mother knows only too well comes round his lips.

"Yes, I was saying—I was remarking to Mrs. Theobald that we shall be near neighbours soon," begins Emma, faintly.

But now Mrs. Crosbie, the momentary weakness of panic over, proves herself at once equal to the occasion, and true to the principles upon which every action of her life is based—Emma, my dear," she interrupts, in the silkiest, best contained tone, "you really should be more careful in these foreign places. A mistake of the kind has often entailed the most em-*bar*-rassing results. To this lady," icily regarding not Jane's eyes but the exact centre of her forehead, "to this lady we owe, I am sure, every apology for our inadvertence."

And quietly passing her hand within Emma's arm, Mrs. Crosbie bows condescendingly towards Jane, as much as to say she will overlook that young person's impertinence in having been mistaken for a princess, and prepares to move away.

Up flushes the hot blood over Rawdon Crosbie's face. Before he can collect his temper enough to speak, however, Blossy, seeing that the owner of the "pitty zings" is going, has complicated the position by rushing to Emma, throwing her little arms round the heiress's knees, and holding up her face to be kissed.

And now Jane feels that the time has arrived for her to throw down the gauntlet of defiance, too, and enter the lists. "Blossy, my pet," and she rises, and, though her limbs tremble under her with indignation, walks, very calm and self-possessed, towards the child, "give back the little fish this lady lent you to play with."

"Oh no—oh, please?" stammers Emma, her own not ungenerous heart, and Rawdon's face, and Blossy's uplifted arms, all pleading on one side; the warning pressure of Mrs. Crosbie's fingers on the other. "I—I meant the little girl to keep it as her own if you don't mind."

"Give it back at once, child," repeats Jane sternly.

"Me not!" cries Blossy, hugging what she feels to be her own legitimate possession to her breast, and setting her teeth tight. "Me dot mine fiss."

Upon this Jane, stooping, lays her hand over the resolute tiny fingers with force, and straightway rises to heaven such a shriek as I trust few small children save Blossy Theobald have the power to send forth. A shriek not of terror, not of weakness, but defiance; the veritablest war-cry that ever issued from a pair of coral baby lips. Forward rushes the Belgian nurse, ready for battle, then comes another cry, and another, and then down falls Blossy prone, the fish beneath her in the dust, a passionate-tossed heap of white embroidery, vigorously kicking legs, and dishevelled golden curls.

People begin to turn round more and more: they stare at Jane, at Rawdon, at every member of the group.

"Pray do not let this painful scene be prolonged," remarks Mrs. Crosbie, who, it must be confessed, stands now on vantage ground; "Emma, my dear, I really must request of you to accompany me." And with victorious dignity radiating from every fold of her olive-green dress, away Mrs. Crosbie walks, Emma Marsland at her side.

So Rawdon is left alone with Mrs. Theobald. The blood runs tingling through his veins with shame; shame for his mother, for himself, for the very name of Crosbie and all belonging to it. He glances at Mrs. Theobald, and sees that the colour has died down on her cheeks; something not very unlike tears are in her eyes as she stands and looks after the retreating forms of the enemy. Poor Jane! The heat, the excitement of the fray are over now, and she is feeling, keenly, scorchingly (as even Bohemian women can feel some things), this slight that has been newly offered to her by the hands of her "sisters."

He advances, more humbly than he would have done had Jane been an empress, and falters out some lame and impotent excuse for his mother's conduct. "The stiffness of English manners—living a good deal out of the world—the pleasure his father and he will feel in welcoming Mr. and Mrs. Theobald as neighbours." These words, and others like unto them, fall indistinctly on Jane's ear, and she knows that one friend, at least, will await her in Chalkshire if she choose. Shall she accept the proffered olive branch, or stand upon her own dignity?

She hesitates, and Rawdon Crosbie speaks again. "If you are going back towards the Bellevue, perhaps you will let me walk with you, Mrs. Theobald? Please do!"

And Jane's determination is taken; the more quickly in that she can discern how Mrs. Crosbie and Emma, under pretence of sitting down, are watching her movements from a distance. If war is to be waged against her, on a grand and aggressive scale, by the ladies of

Chalkshire, why should she not enrol every husband, brother, and son, willing to enter the lists, for her own poor little guerilla system of defence!

"But what will your mamma say, Mr. Crosbie? In these foreign places, you know, one can't be too careful. What will your mamma and Miss Marsland say to this fresh inadvertence?"

"Miss Marsland is excessively kind-hearted," says Rawdon, quickly. "You must not judge of Emma by any of the old-fashioned opinions my mother imposes upon her. Emmy never, voluntarily, committed an unamiable action in her life."

"'Emmy' talked to me for five whole minutes," says Jane, demurely. "And after knowing, too, that I wasn't the Princess Czartoriska! She also presented a silver fish with green eyes to my daughter. I have every reason to be grateful to Miss Marsland."

At the word "fish" Blossy uplifts her head, and seeing that her mother smiles, and that the ladies are gone, jumps to her feet, the nurse indiscriminately dusting hair, face, legs, arms, and embroidery with a corner of her apron.

"Me dot mine fiss!" she remarks, with triumph to Jane, the moment the process is over.

"Yes, miss, as you've always 'dot' your own way in everything," answers Jane. Then taking her little daughter in her arms, as mammas of the upper classes are never seen to take their children in public, walks back towards the Bellevue; young Rawdon (thinking the faces of mother and child the fairest his eyes have ever rested upon) in attendance.

"You see, my dear Emma?" Mrs. Crosbie remarks, in the dim perspective of the avenue. "You see?"

"Yes, I do see, and I'm very sorry I ever spoke to her," says Emma, with perfect sincerity. "I dare say, mamma," but her voice trembles somewhat, "I dare say Rawdon is trying to be civil to make up for the slight we showed her."

Mrs. Crosbie laughs, a quiet, lady-like little laugh, and yet it falls like lead on Emma's heart. "You are always amiable and unselfish, but you are very unversed in the world's ways, Emma—very. What can a person like Mrs. Theobald expect, what can she ever have met with, from ladies, *but* slights?"

"Oh, mamma!"

"Your ignorance of evil does you credit, my dear child, still Emma—and remember I speak to you exactly as though you were my own daughter—nothing could be more ill-advised, as matters stand now, than for me to permit any intercourse whatever between our house and the house of Francis Theobald. For you, my dear girl, I do not dread; your own high feminine standard of right and decorum would, I know, under all circumstances be your safeguard, but . . . there is Rawdon! If I feel warmly—if I seem to have acted a little harshly towards this very painfully-placed young person, remember my responsibilities. There is Rawdon!"

A choking sensation comes into Emma Marsland's throat. Is not Rawdon her own especial property? Half an hour ago did not she and Rawdon kiss as only lovers kiss who one day will be man and wife? And now, to hear his mother speak of him as at the mercy of Mrs. Theobald—of the first pretty but doubtful woman who chooses to look at him with encouraging eyes!

"Rawdon is not made of barley-sugar, mamma"—this she says with a sorrowful little failure of a laugh—"I don't suppose he will quite melt away, because he happens to walk the length of the street with Mrs. Theobald! Charming though she may be, you know she is married. Don't let us forget the existence of Mr. Theobald and Blossy."

"If she were not married the case would be very different. If, with all her want of birth, yes, and with her antecedents on the stage and her dreadful existing relations, this young woman were Francis Theobald's sister instead of Francis Theobald's wife, I might feel my duty less plainly marked out before me. With all his faults, I do not consider Rawdon a boy to be guilty of the crime of making a low *marriage*."

"Then what are you afraid of, mamma?" exclaims Miss Marsland, hastily. "Really, I can't help thinking that you a little overrate Rawdon's susceptibility; or do you consider Mrs. Theobald's beauty so transcendent that no man, not even Rawdon, can look at her and survive?"

"I don't think Mrs. Theobald beautiful at all," answers Mrs. Crosbie. "She possesses the transient attractions of youth, and of a certain meretricious style——"

Oh, Mrs. Crosbie, Mrs. Crosbie! What of the graceful mien, the elegance, the distinction you perceived in Jane as she passed out from the hotel?

"But she belongs, by birth and association alike, to a class of persons whom society rightly considers dangerous, and puts beyond its barriers. A class who we know, and regret, must exist. Society will have its opera, and opera necessitates the ballet—but with whom no right-minded mother would, voluntarily, allow her young son to be thrown. Your own delicacy of feeling, my dear Emma, will, I am sure, make you sensible that I have said enough."

But Emma is not to be silenced yet. "I shall do just as you choose, mamma dear, about my own acquaintance with Mrs. Theobald; and I'm sorry, very sorry, that the acquaintance ever began. But I must say I consider Rawdon perfectly safe in her society; yes, or in the society of the most beautiful and witty and fascinating actress in London. No doubt young men talk to these sort of people differently to how they do to us, and—and, perhaps, find what they say more amusing!" Emma gives a sigh as she speaks. Far away she can see Rawdon and Jane slowly strolling in the direction of the Bellevue. "As long as we know we hold the first place in their *affections*, what does it matter?"

"In these levelling days it is sometimes difficult to know who does hold the first place anywhere," is Mrs. Crosbie's answer, "and, indeed, guided by our own wisdom, it would frequently be embarrassing to decide who should, and who should not, be admitted to our intimacy. Fortunately, my dear Emma, there are Rules, and, fortunately also, there is the conduct of those above us in station to be our guide."

"Those above us sometimes number very queer members among their ranks," says Emma; thinking, perhaps, of some of the ultra well-born, ultra fast people, even in virtuous Chalkshire.

"Never ballet-girls," says Mrs. Crosbie, calmly. "Never ballet-girls, and never persons who play the trombone in orchestras! Of private misconduct, my Emma, we, erring creatures of the hour, are not the appointed judges. Sufficient for you and me, and every one of us, to regulate our own conscience, and leave that of persons above us in station in peace."

And with the enunciation of this admirable Christian sentiment the conversation closes.

CHAPTER VI

YOUNG RAWDON GAINS HIS FREEDOM

"I SHALL expect to see you at the ball to-night then," cries Jane, looking back over her shoulder with a friendly farewell nod to Rawdon; "and I promise you two round dances—that is, if the powers that be give you leave to come."

And away she trips with her child through the courtyard of the hotel, Rawdon Crosbie—his heart, his eyes, full of sunlight—watching the airy flutter of her blue and white muslin dress till it is out of sight.

The courtyard is empty now. Even Mr. Crosbie has finished his *Times*, and betaken himself elsewhere to wile away the interminable hours and get up an appetite for his dinner. Rawdon lights his cigar, takes one of the vacant chairs under the lindens, puts his legs across another chair, folds his arms, and begins to muse, with the delicious sense, for a quarter of an hour at least, of being his own master.

What a pretty woman Mrs. Theobald is! He has not the faintest notion whether her nose is classical or celestial, whether her mouth is geometrically straight, or the reverse; he remembers only generalities, the exquisite frank allurement of all that health and youth and freshness; remembers only that, if he can get leave, she has promised to dance with him at the Casino ball to-night.

If he can get leave! Ridiculous doubt. Who should hinder him? His mother—Emma? Certainly not poor Emma; indeed, more than likely, Emmy at the last moment may take a fancy to go to the ball herself. At this possibility Rawdon falls with a rush, suddenly, blankly, as one falls from airy heights of nothingness after inhaling the fumes of nitrogen gas or chloroform. He takes his cigar from his lips, examines its tip of burnt ash gravely, looks up at the sky, and remarks the circles that the swallows are making far away overhead. Vaguely it occurs to him that the swallows are enviable. They are free agents, at least; never consult parents in the matter of their affections; never commit themselves, as animals endowed with the doubtful advantages of speech do, beforehand.

Has he committed himself? The cigar burns dead, and he re-kindles it by a moment's application to his lips, then holds it idly again between his fingers. Is Emma Marsland his affianced wife or not? He tries honestly to remember what was said before the donkeys came, and his heart answers joyously, "Nothing." And then he remembers Emma's tell-tale face of happiness, and the kiss that was exchanged between them, and honour and conscience cry heavily, "Everything." Of course, of course he is engaged, absolutely now, as he has been, virtually, from the time he left off jackets, and Emma is the best-hearted little girl living, and he the luckiest of fellows.

He returns his cigar to his mouth, smokes away steadily, and once more looks up at the sky. It is blue—blue like some women's eyes. And jocund airs are kissing the green leaves in the lindens, and summer and the world are fair, and his heart is young, and he is going to dance with Mrs. Theobald to-night. And because a man is engaged, because a man is married, is no reason, when one comes to think of it, for not loyally making the best of every pleasant hour life may chance to bring within his reach.

It is the first time Rawdon Crosbie has ever succeeded in reconciling inclination perfectly and amicably with fate. And more danger lurks hidden, perhaps, under the optimist philosophy than he himself knows of.

The hours wear away, every minute of which brings those two promised waltzes nearer; the family-party meet at dinner (it is a formula of Mrs. Crosbie that the "best people," abroad, never dine at tables-d'hôte), but Rawdon does not muster courage to announce that he intends going to the public ball in the evening. N one seems in particularly lively spirits, and the conversation at table flags. Mr. Crosbie, duly informed in connubial solitude of the fiasco about the Princess, and warned by a certain expression in his wife's eye, touches on no subject nearer home than the present position of New Zealand finance. Rawdon gives answers that betray either culpable indifference to our colonial interests, or entire absence of mind, or both: Emma, embarrassed, naturally, by her consciousness as a newly-affianced bride, eats her food in silence. Mrs. Crosbie is calm and self-contained as ever, but cold as the ice on the centre of the table; addresses her remarks pointedly to her husband or to Miss Marsland, never goes within a yard of meeting Rawdon's eye. It is her in-

variable way of manifesting displeasure towards her son; a way, I may add, that, from the time Rawdon was a baby, has never failed in putting him upon the defensive, whatever the cause of dispute of the moment might chance to be.

After dinner they all betake themselves to the pleasant flower-garden at the back of the hotel. Mr. Crosbie walks up and down the paths, wondering how it is that with this Continental cooking one always feels lighter after dinner than before, and wishing himself back again in Chalkshire. Mrs. Crosbie, a black lace shawl over her head, stands in an attitude, her chin resting on her shapely jewelled fingers, and watches the rising moon. Emma Marsland creeps up to Rawdon, who is smoking again—when does Rawdon not smoke?—under a shady trellised archway at the farther corner of the garden.

How handsome he is, thinks the heiress, gazing up at her lover's most unclassical sunburnt face. And what a fine broad-shouldered fellow! And hers—hers! stealing her fingers under his arm and feeling, even with its attendant cares and jealousies, what a thrilling intoxicating thing love is. Emma is not romantic at ordinary times, but certainly at this moment she would fain be wafted off to some fairy isle in seas unknown with Rawdon Crosbie; no Mrs. Theobald, or any other obnoxiously pretty woman of the unvisited classes, to interrupt their bliss; nightingales to lull the hours; a good cook to dress their four meals a day, and a pretty little rustic church to attend English service in on Sundays.

"Oh, Rawdon," she whispers, and unconsciously her fingers rest closer on his arm, "isn't it delightful?"

"Very," answers Rawdon, promptly. The question chimes in so aptly with the subject he is thinking of just now!

"Do you think, by-and-by, if mamma doesn't mind, we might have another walk?"

"What, to-night?"

"I—I thought so. One of those little shady paths among the woods, only not so uphill."

To a man in love, what music would such a proposal sound? But Rawdon is not in love, and he shirks it with an adroitness that, were Emma more experienced in such matters, might lead her somewhat inconveniently near the truth.

"My mother would be sure to mind, my dear Emma. My mother is not in too amicable a mood, it seems, already. Besides, aren't we very jolly as we are?" Pressing her hand to his side with a lover-like warmth that raises Emma to the third heaven of happiness.

"Very jolly," she whispers, leaning her cheek against his shoulder. It is dusk, Reader, and the spot where they stand is isolated. "Oh dear! in spite of all that dreadful mistake about Mrs. Theobald, what a day of days this has been!"

The tone of her voice makes Rawdon Crosbie realise his position to the full. They are lovers, formally affianced lovers; and in the friendly, flower-scented dusk, and in this close proximity (and with the prospect of the ball before him) the young fellow's own heart almost begins to feel tender.

"If it wasn't that my mother is watching us, Emma, I should——"

"Oh, Rawdon, please! Oh, don't!" If it is possible, she clings a little closer to his side. "Oh, what *do* you mean?"

"Do you want me to tell you more plainly?"

After this there is a long silence. Rawdon gives stealthy glances at a certain brilliantly-lighted row of windows on the first floor of the hotel, across whose blinds flits, ever and anon, a shadow he recognises; Emma, entranced, listens to the beatings of her own heart.

"Only that I don't want to begin by scolding," she remarks at last, in her falsetto little voice, "I should certainly scold you, sir, for what you did this afternoon."

Rawdon is all contrition before he knows the nature of his offence. He wants sincerely to propitiate everyone. He wants sincerely to get his leave of absence, and hurry away to dress. "Scold me, my dearest Emma? Why, what have I done, now?"

"Not flirted with Mrs. Theobald, in the least," says Emma, with playful emphasis.

"It was with the Princess Czartoriska, my dear Emmy. My mother introduced me. How could I do less than accompany her Highness home?"

"Do you think her pretty? I don't in the least."

"Pretty!" repeats Rawdon, innocently. "Think whom pretty?"

"Oh, don't pretend—Mrs. Theobald, of course. *I* don't care for her face a bit." And in saying this, Emma speaks with thorough sincerity. Jane is a style seldom appreciated save by the other sex. What women extol in each other are regular features, charms that can be catalogued; men are all for charms that can be felt. Thus, a man's beauty is apt to have fine shoulders, bright complexion, a sunny smile; while a woman admired by women can boast of an accurate nose and mouth, coldish eyes, and a thin waist. Rarely will you find this rule at fault. "She hasn't one good feature, her nose is not straight, I think, and when you look close there are two marks of small pox on her forehead. Still, taking her altogether, I suppose she is a woman that most people would call nice looking?"

Pressed thus into a corner, Rawdon confesses that he should probably go with the many. Mrs. Theobald—yes, he supposed Mrs. Theobald is a woman nineteen persons out of twenty would call nice looking.

"Without being in the least handsome, really?" persists Emma Marsland.

"Very likely. The truth is," says Rawdon, carelessly, "I was thinking much more of my mother's queer behaviour than of anything else."

"I'm afraid mamma did seem harsh," says Emma, "but it was necessary to get out of the scrape some way or another. I took quite a fancy to the child, and I don't see why I should dislike Mrs. Theobald, if she were not such bad style, poor thing! Still, until we are sure whether she will be noticed in the country or not——"

Emma pauses, and her lover does not attempt to help her out. The twilight deepens, the great white stars come out upon the violet night, and Rawdon is again in a fever of impatience, and Emma in Paradise, or as near an approach to Paradise as her constitution allows of. "I wonder whether mamma *would* mind our taking another walk?" she suggests after a time, her hand still resting affectionately on Rawdon's arm. "We should have an hour still before ten o'clock——"

"Ten o'clock—by George, that reminds me!" cries Rawdon, with an ingenuous little start; "I ought to be dressing already."

"Dressing?"

"Dressing! White choker, lavender gloves; all the preliminary process of torture."

"Rawdon, you are going out somewhere!"

"Only to the ball at the Casino. Didn't I tell you this morning I meant to go? Stupid kind of affair, I believe, never kept up after midnight; still, when one is at Rome——"

"And you can care for such things, you can take any pleasure in going to balls and parties, and *me* left behind?"

Five minutes before, Rawdon Crosbie was brought seriously to realise his position as a lover. Miss Marsland's tone, now, makes him feel like a lawfully-wedded husband! And the first foretaste of the dual state, the first prospective beat of the wings against the prison bars is, I must confess, not overmuch to his taste.

"Pleasure is a strong word, Emma. If I am not inordinately bored I may be thankful. At all events," throwing away the end of his cigar, "if I am to go at all it is time for me to dress."

"Is Mrs. Theobald to be there? because, if she is——" But here a beetle, or heavy-winged insect of some kind, blunders opportunely into Miss Marsland's face, and the threat remains unspoken. She screams, fights, begins to run, Rawdon, with the valour of a soldier and the ardour of a lover, rushing to the rescue.

"Why, Emmy, you silly little muff, what's the matter now? This is worse than the donkeys."

"It's somewhere about me, I know it is; it's somewhere about me! Oh, there's another, the air's full of them. I'm sure they're cockchafers —I should die if I got a cockchafer into my hair!"

Cockchafers they prove—of the large and aggressive kind peculiar to certain wooded districts of the Rhineland and Belgium — and suddenly, as at some preconcerted signal, they seem to be let loose in myriads upon the face of the earth.

Mrs. Crosbie, by the light of the moon, makes dignified passes at them with the corner of her lace shawl; Mr. Crosbie is ducking his bald head and flapping them away with his handkerchief; they strike Rawdon on the nose; they whizz, like musket-shot, past Emma's affrighted ears. They are here, there, everywhere.

"I can never stand it. I'll go in. Oh, mamma, mamma, dear, did you ever see anything like these disgusting horrid things! I know they sting!"

And the heiress clasps her fat little hands above her head and, followed by Mrs. Crosbie, flies away—the ball, Mrs. Theobald, jealousy itself forgotten—to the shelter of the hotel.

By which means young Rawdon gains his freedom, and makes the most of it. Blessed for ever be the Belgian cockchafer!

CHAPTER VII

THE "GRANDE DUCHESSE" WALTZES

The rooms occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Theobald are absolutely the best the Hotel Bellevue possesses; rooms not unfrequently assigned to emperors, kings, and all other kinds of royalties in the height of the Spa season.

For Francis Theobald is one of those happy-go-lucky "Rip Van Winkle" sort of men, who take the world equally easily whether the road leads uphill or down, and just eat white bread or black according as their gods think fit for the moment to provide. Only, when it is white, Mr. Theobald will have it of the very whitest!

"Always go to the best hotel in the place, and take the best rooms the hotel can give you," is one of his maxims. "It's the cheapest in the end." Everything pleasant is sure to be the cheapest in the end, according to Francis Theobald's theory of life. "You put up at a second-rate inn, order an economical dinner, get disgusted with everything, move—nothing so expensive as moving—go to the hotel you should have gone to at first, and are fleeced by two scoundrels instead of one for your pains."

So at the present moment (while Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are shutting out the cockchafers from a gloomy little sitting-room on the second *étage*) luxury surrounds the Theobalds—paupers till yesterday—on every side. Mirrors from ceiling to floor, embroidered curtains, laced pillow-cases, Sèvres and Dresden services, clusters of wax-lights in silver sconces, on their respective toilet-tables. . . . And exactly four napoleons, ready money, in their pockets.

Jane, on one side of the room, has just fastened the last button of her white silk ball dress, and stands for a moment in grave, but satisfied abstraction before the looking-glass. Plain white silk, before a flower, or necklace, or bracelet has been added, is one of the severest

pieces as he stands—for the honour of the next dance.

"It's a quadrille," says Jane, stretching out her hand to Mrs. Crosbie's son as if she had known him a dozen years; "but you can have it if you like."

"I think the agreement was that I should have two round dances?" Rawdon remarks, with tolerable audacity.

"I know it was, but you can have the quadrille all the same. It will give us time to get better acquainted."

She passes away from him as she says this. Some other foreigner comes up and asks her for a dance, and then another, and another. Her card must be filling fast Rawdon feels, blankly. Not a chance for him beyond the two promised dances which lured him here, if indeed she is quite sure to remember these. Why, on earth, if he has come to the ball to enjoy himself does he not put Mrs. Theobald away out of his mind, and, taking a leaf from her book, secure to himself other partners? He looks round the room, and sees pretty girls of all nations, pretty girls in pink, white, and blue, some already appropriated, some standing by their chaperons meekly biding their time. A slim little raven-haired child of sixteen, in white and scarlet, arrests his fancy. She has great dark eyes; they meet Rawdon's, and say, as plainly as eyes can say anything, "Dance with me!" He wonders what is the etiquette about introductions in these foreign ball-rooms; pulls on his gloves a little, gets a few steps nearer the raven hair, finds the owner prettier even than he thought, forgets Mrs. Theobald, wants only one more grain of courage, one more glance from the dark eyes, to walk boldly up and take his chance, when Jane's hearty English voice sounds close beside him.

"Our quadrille, Mr. Crosbie, if we mean to dance it."

Rawdon turns and sees the Frenchman gracefully bowing himself, as Frenchmen only can, into the background, and Mrs. Theobald waiting for *him*. Since the days of his schoolboy rapture on finding himself first in a race or in a competition, Rawdon's heart has, perhaps, not beat with such quick pleasure as at this moment.

"You were so engrossed with the young person in scarlet and white I scarcely knew whether I had better interrupt you," Jane remarks, as they are taking their places. "Really, Mr. Crosbie, I am surprised that you, an engaged man, should show such levity! In these foreign resorts, you know, one can't be too careful. The most embarrassing results may arise from a single inadvertence."

"But one may lessen danger by dividing it, Mrs. Theobald. Black eyes may possibly be a safeguard against blue ones, may they not?"

"Don't ask me. I finished with all those follies a century ago. Besides, I've been in so much danger all my life that I don't know now what danger is. For a poor little boy of your age, it's very different."

"A boy of my age! What have I done to deserve these names? I was an engaged man just now."

"But a poor little boy may be engaged, may he not?" Jane retorts, with gravely compassionating lips.

As she speaks the figure of the quadrille begins; and, slow dance though it is, with every bar that is played, with every lightest touch of his partner's hand Rawdon Crosbie's pulse beats quicker. That Mrs. Theobald is not of the same class as Emma Marsland and his mother he knows, better even than he knew it this afternoon. The familiarity with which she treats him, jokes him, patronises him, after half a day's acquaintance; her freedom from the set vapidities of conventional small-talk, the very excellence of her movements in dancing—all divide her from women of his own world in Rawdon's sight: divide her from them, yet by no means lessen her own charm! Few men of two-and-twenty but are socialistic in these matters, above all when a pretty woman shows her lack of patrician breeding by too facile intimacy with themselves.

After the quadrille comes a waltz.

"I have kept it for you," says Jane; "this, and galop number nine, and, if you deserve it, waltz ten, the last of the evening. I hope you are a good dancer? If you are not, mind, if you make the least exhibition of me I stop after the first turn."

Now, Rawdon is by no means sure whether, critically judged, he is a good dancer or no, and Jane's point-blank question makes him hot.

"I don't fall down, Mrs. Theobald, generally, and I don't know that I tread upon my partner's toes. I suppose I get on as well as most other fellows."

"Ah," Jane shakes her head, resignedly, "if the other fellows are English, I know what that means. However, we can but make a breakdown of it."

And thus hopefully encouraged, Rawdon puts his arm round her shapely non-whaleboned waist, and they start. Rawdon Crosbie has gone to a good many Chalkshire balls in his life: he feels that he has never *danced* till now. Light as a feather, firm as a rock, his partner at once buoys him up, steadies him, steers. In a sort of dream he hears the music of those Grande Duchesse waltzes, and breathes the fragrance of the roses Jane wears in her hair. What is Emma Marsland, or his engagement to her? What is anything in the world beside the rhythm and the movement, the sweetness and the light of this incomparable present moment?

I said that Rawdon Crosbie has never danced: I might almost say he has never lived till now.

They stop after making two turns round the ball-room. Alas for sentiment! Rawdon has to take out his handkerchief and wipe his forehead. Jane looks in better breathing condition than when they started.

"We . . . didn't fall down, Mrs. Theobald, after all?"

"No, we didn't fall down," Jane answers, laconically.

"Or make an exhibition of ourselves in any way?"

"I hope not."

Her tone cools Rawdon more effectually than do all the floods of night air which are streaming in on them liberally through every open window.

"Hope? I'm afraid you think me an outrageously bad dancer?"

"Oh no, I don't. Your style is bad—atrocious! and you don't know how to hold your partner, and your feet seem to get in your own way. You've been spoilt—utterly spoilt—by bad teaching and bad partners, still I see no reason why you shouldn't dance in time."

"Thank you," says Rawdon Crosbie, very red.

"You noticed my last partner? His name is De Lansac, the best friend Theobald and I have. Well, now, you couldn't do better than take him as a model. His style is perfect."

"Is it indeed?"

"Perfect. And of course, I'm a judge from having been brought up to the profession." Nothing can be more unabashed than Mrs. Theobald's manner of making this confession. "I tell Theobald, sometimes, that when everything else fails I can earn my bread by giving dancing-lessons. Will you attend my classes, Mr. Crosbie? I'll take you on moderate terms as an old friend."

"You do look upon me as a friend already, then?" whispers Rawdon, forgetting his own smarting vanity in a moment.

"Not only a friend, but a neighbour. Hasn't someone told me our estates in Chalkshire join? Well, if you like, you may consider this evening as the first of the course. You won't be offended"—looking up at him with her blue eyes—"if I tell you of your faults?"

"Offended!" echoes Rawdon; "I should think not. Why——"

Why, he would like the whole of life to be one long dancing-lesson; the same musicians playing the same waltz; the same sweet-smelling roses lulling his senses; and Jane for ever finding fault with him! He pulls up in time, however. Ignorant of the world though he may be, some instinct of discretion warns him that Mrs. Theobald is the kind of woman to ridicule pretty speeches mercilessly. And after another minute's breathing space, away they waltz again.

"Better, much better. Don't be afraid of yourself. Don't think whether you have feet or not. Lighter, more on the toes—no, don't jump about in the air. So." With admonitions and encouragements like these, Rawdon's lesson draws to a close (a lesson in which he has, perhaps, gained something beside Terpsichorean experience) and he has to resign his monitress to others.

He has forgotten all about the little girl in white and scarlet. He does not want to dance with her, or with anyone. He wants nothing but to hear the fiddlers begin the first bar of number nine. Oh! the interminable galop and waltz, and quadrille, and galop and quadrille, and waltz that intervene! Mrs. Theobald lightens the misery of waiting by giving him a smile or nod, or friendly word whenever, circulating alone about the rooms, he crosses her path; he attempts to shorten it once by going into the *salle de jeu*, where he is just in time to see a croupier pushing a cheerful pile of gold across the *trente-et-quarante* table to Jane's husband; and once he retires for some minutes into one of the embrasured windows of the ballroom—where he observes the stars, and thinks a little of Emma, and a great deal of Mrs. Theobald! And then, in the middle of dance number six, he returns abruptly to his first place of concealment beside the orchestra, and watches Jane, steadily and without interruption, until the moment arrives at which he may legitimately claim her.

"Why in the world are you looking so miserable, and where have you been hiding yourself?" are her first words. "If at your juvenile age you don't go to a ball to dance, what *do* you go for?"

"I came here to dance, and remained—to learn," answers Rawdon, gravely. "I am thinking of edification, not amusement, Mrs. Theobald."

"I saw you go into the card-room, two or three dances ago. Did you notice what Theobald was about? Winning money? Oh! take me in there!" putting her hand quickly within his arm. "Yes, I remember the galop, but we have quite time to go and have a look at the tables before it begins."

They find Mr. Theobald no longer playing *trente-et-quarante* himself, but forming one of a knot of spectators, an extemporised gallery that has assembled round the *roulette* table to watch an extraordinary run of ill-luck which, during the last quarter of an hour, has set in against the Princess Czartoriska.

"The illustrious personage I ought to have been!" whispers Jane, calling Rawdon's attention to her Highness's Calmuck high-cheek-boned face; the sallow forehead covered with big drops of agitation, the black oval eyes bloodshot and horribly fixed of expression. "And to think this is all the pleasure great people can buy with their money! They say she was a gipsy girl when the Prince Czartoriska married her. She must have been a vast deal happier in those days, I should think. Why you and I, dancing our poor little waltz just now, were richer in reality than she is."

"Only our riches were too soon spent, Mrs. Theobald!"

"Too soon spent? How so? Why, every time I dance—with you, or De Lansac, or A, or B, or C—and hear good music, and feel that I am young and strong, and have a polished floor under my feet (and provided, of course, I've a *decent* partner), I say I'm richer than her poor old painted gouty haggard Highness. It

"Yes, I'll promise not to forsake you—because Mr. Crosbie is here and will talk to me; for nothing else."

Thus speaking, she takes a light from a side table and disappears into the adjoining room. Jane disappears, and almost at the same moment the outer door opens, and unannounced, unceremoniously, like everything else that has to do with the Theobald's life, another person enters.

"Ah, Molenos, old fellow, here you are!" cries Theobald, cordially, but without stirring from a sofa on which he has thrown himself full-length. "Crosbie, let me introduce you to my friend Molenos. He doesn't understand a word of English, and no one in Spa can find out what language he does understand; but he is one of the best fellows living. Have some brandy and seltzer, Molenos? Cognac and zelsare. De Lansac, convey to our friend, if you can, that my intentions are hospitable."

Molenos is a rich young Mexican merchant, speaking not one syllable of English, and only about a dozen words of French, but with whom, through the universal language of *écarté*, Theobald and De Lansac have succeeded in becoming intimate. He bows, with an instinct of having been introduced to Rawdon, and, looking round the room, exhausts a quarter of his vocabulary by remarking, "Madame pas ici?"

"Madame will be *ici* directly, *toute de suite*," says Theobald. "Curious run of luck that against the Czartoriska, was it not, Molenos?"

"Oui, Oui," says the Mexican, "Czartoriska, perdue."

He has just six words of French now unspent, but with these, Theobald speaking English, De Lansac French, he manages to sustain the conversation; drinks some sherry and seltzer, that is to say, shows his white teeth and answers "Oui, Oui," to everything, and looks intelligent.

"I don't know that it is too late for a little *écarté*," Theobald suggests after a time. "De Lansac, I think there are cards in that drawer by you. You play *écarté*, Crosbie?"

Before Rawdon can answer, the door communicating with the bedroom opens and Jane reappears. She has exchanged her opera cloak for a white lace shawl, which falls in soft clouds over her neck and arms. The roses, half-faded, are in her hair: she holds a little bunch of fresh ones, crimson, yellow, and white, in her hand.

"You play *écarté*, of course, Crosbie?" Theobald has to repeat, Rawdon's eyes and ears and whole attention having become suddenly absorbed elsewhere.

"I beg your pardon—thank you, yes, sometimes."

"Not to-night, though," says Jane, peremptorily. "Oh, good evening to you, Mr. Molenos." Judging from the nod she accords him, the young Mexican is not one of Mrs. Theobald's favourites. "Mr. Crosbie is going to talk to me and not play *écarté* to-night, Theobald, and all nights, too, if he takes my advice."

A quick look, not exactly of displeasure, but of something very different to their usual lazy expression, passes from Mr. Theobald's handsome grey eyes. "You may depend upon it, my dear Jane, Crosbie is too gallant a man to refuse such an alternative," he remarks, good-humouredly, but with emphasis.

Jane bites her lip, colours, and hangs her head. The remark evidently has told.

"And Mees Bébé?" asks De Lansac, promptly. It enters Rawdon Crosbie's head that the Frenchman is sufficiently a friend of the house not only to understand domestic storm signals, but to throw himself boldly between man and wife. "There are two days that I have not seen Mees Bébé. How is she looking?"

"You had better judge for yourself," says Jane, returning towards the half-open bedroom door. "Come in; I'll light you." And taking up the candle she had just set down, she goes with De Lansac into the other room, while Mr. Theobald, assisted by the young Mexican, sets ready the card-table.

Rawdon Crosbie looks on, open-eyed, at this new specimen of Jane's thoroughly free-and-easy style of manners. To De Lansac, a foreigner, to Mrs. Theobald and her husband, professed Bohemians, the situation is one of the simplest matter-of-course. Blossy asleep on her pillow, or Blossy playing on the floor in the daytime—what is the difference? As often as not, when funds run low, during their wanderings, the Theobalds do not possess the luxury of a sitting-room at all. But Rawdon has never been out of her British Majesty's dominions for more than a consecutive fortnight since he was born. On all points connected with the received canons of artificial decorum he is British—unconsciously, very likely, but British to the core. And the coolness with which Mrs. Theobald conducts De Lansac to the side of Blossy's small bed, the way they talk there in whispers, the final tableau of De Lansac stooping to kiss one of Mees Bébé's pink hands, Jane shading the candle at his side—I say the utter, the flagrant disregard of insular prejudice evinced by the whole scene, takes him positively and ludicrously aback.

"Now then, Jenny," cries Theobald, looking round from the card-table to which he has drawn up the easiest chair in the room for his own special use. "When you have quite done Bébé-worship and can spare De Lansac, we are waiting for him; but don't hurry." His tone is unruffled as ever; the sweetest voice in the world has Francis Theobald; all his transient ill-humour fled.

"In a minute," cries out Jane, "I just want to show him my new dress."

And upon this—shade of Mrs. Crosbie, could'st thou witness it!—she runs across to a bureau, the Frenchman following; a grand silk dress with lace flounces is produced, held up, enlarged upon by Jane, while De Lansac, whose turn it is now to hold the candle, gravely criticises its "points."

"I never had such a swell dress before," Rawdon overhears her say. "But the moment we heard of our fortune, nothing would do for Theobald but he must order me this from the most expensive milliner in Brussels. The colour is prettier by daylight, just my mauve, you know, and the white face makes it so becoming. Now, which do *you* say is correct, a mauve or a white bonnet to go with it?"

De Lansac holds one opinion, Jane another. They argue the momentous question, inch by inch, and Jane at last slowly gives way. Then, after carefully rearranging the dress in its place, they return to the sitting-room. De Lansac rolls himself a cigarette as he joins the other two men at the card-table, Jane, her face wearing the same frank open smile which is its distinguishing charm, comes up to Rawdon.

"You and I must entertain each other if we want to be entertained at all," she tells him. "I hope you feel in an amusing vein?"

"Not in the very least," says Rawdon, stiff and glum. Then he adds, with the pleasant consciousness that he is striking a side-blow at foreign frivolity, "indeed I trust, yes, I am thankful to say I trust, Mrs. Theobald, that I am never amusing."

"Oh, you don't mean that! You are only modest, as you were about your dancing, and see how well I got you through it after all! Now come with me," extending her hand to him as one would do to a child of six, "and I'll show you my photographs. You must give me yours, by the way. I'm sure you make a good one."

Crossing the room, she takes an album from one of the tables, and moves away with it to an ottoman in the corner farthest from the card-players. "I don't know whether we shall have light enough," and she opens her book and signs to Rawdon to take his place beside her. "Good heavens, my poor boy!" looking hard in his face, "what is the matter with you? If you can't be amusing, at least be good-tempered, for my sake. See, here's a flower for you, if you'll condescend to accept it?"

She selects the freshest rosebud from the bunch she has in her hand and gives it to him. It is one of the same kind, it has the same odour, as those she wore at the ball, and Rawdon forgets Monsieur de Lansac and the little scene of Bébé-worship as quickly as an hour before he forgot poor Emmy, and the warnings of his own conscience. "I'm a fearful bear, I know, Mrs. Theobald." The admission is made in too low a tone to be heard by any ear but Jane's. "I wonder you take the trouble to talk to me at all."

Jane bends her face and examines the silver and velvet binding of her album. "To tell you the truth, I wonder at it too," she remarks, after a short silence, and in the same undertone as Rawdon's. "I was never nearer anything in my life than I was to bidding you go about your business in the avenue to-day, I can tell you."

"Mrs. Theobald! Why, what had I done?"

"You were your mamma's son," says Jane, quickly. "Oh, don't defend yourself," she adds, as Rawdon is about to speak; "don't defend yourself, and don't think I mean to say bad things of anybody belonging to you. We all act according to our lights, and I tell you when your mother and Miss Marsland walked away, the crime of my not being a princess discovered, I was within an ace—yes, within an ace," her lips quiver, "of insulting *you*, sir, as you stood there!"

"You couldn't have insulted me," says Rawdon, with a humility that touches her in his voice. "However harshly you had treated me, I should have felt that I, that all of us, had deserved it. If you had told me to go about my business——"

"Well?"

"Well, I don't think I should have gone, Mrs. Theobald, that's all."

"Wouldn't you? Ah, you don't know how I can look, how I can speak, when I'm in a rage! If I had said—what for a moment it was in my heart to say—I'll undertake to answer for your obeying me."

"But you didn't say it," Rawdon pleads. "You were generous——"

"I acted according to my lights. We needn't use grand words. I did not quarrel with you. I don't mean to quarrel with you, no, not never no more, as Blossy says. Now, let me show you my photographs. First, what do you think of my book? It was De Lansac's present on my last birthday. See, here's my name." She points to some Lilliputian French handwriting on the title-page. "Can't you read it? 'Jane Theobald, on her nineteenth birthday. From B.D.L.' (that means Bernard de Lansac), and the date. He didn't want to put my age; so like a Frenchman! but I would have it. What does age matter?"

"Not very much at nineteen," Rawdon Crosbie assents.

"No, nor at thirty-nine either. I know I would never tell an untruth about mine. By-the-by, how old are you?"

Rather shamefacedly, Rawdon Crosbie acknowledges that he will not be twenty-three till next November.

"Twenty-three! What, you, twenty-three—more than three years older than me? What a ridiculous idea!"

"You took me for fifteen, no doubt, Mrs. Theobald. That accounts for your good-nature in advising me not to play *écarté*."

"I should have said the same if I had taken you for fifty. I detest gambling in every form, and I detest people who gamble. On the day that I first see you play cards I say good-bye to you. Mind that."

"Then I shall never touch another card. I can make the promise with a very easy conscience. Still," and he glances at the *écarté* table and its occupants, "I can scarcely believe you carry out such extreme opinions always?"

"Well, I don't detest Theobald, certainly, or . . . or De Lansac." The colour comes again to Jane's face, her eyes sink.

"You do not detest Mr. Theobald or Monsieur de Lansac, but you do detest the men who play with them?" Rawdon hazards.

"Precisely. You have described my sentiments to a nicety. And now, please, let us talk of something else. Oh, the photographs. You promised me, didn't you, that you would give me yours?" The little flurry of her manner does not escape Rawdon's notice, neither does he forget that De Lansac's was the last name mentioned. "Please don't let me hear 'No, thank you,' again. You'll send it, bring it in to-morrow morning, if you have one with you. Now let us begin."

She gives Rawdon the book to support, and leans over its pages with him, close; so close that her breath is on the lad's cheek, the folds of her lace drapery touch his sunburnt hand. "I'll tell you who the people are as we go along. They are a motley collection as you will see."

A motley collection they prove. Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans, men of every nation under the sun; the slenderest sprinkling of ladies, and these bearing all the irrepressible "artiste" stamp. Jane never adds to her picture gallery by purchase: with scarcely an exception, her photographs are portraits of people she has known, and the book tells the story, in some sort, of her eventful vagrant life.

"I've put them, as near as I could, by date. The people you see here, and for the next three pages, are vagabonds, the professional people I knew before I married Theobald. This old fellow is my Uncle Dick. You must have heard him often. He plays in the orchestra of the Theatre Royal—dear, jolly old face that he has, bless his heart! And this is my sister Min. You have seen her, of course?"

Turning his eyes upon the very characteristic portrait of Uncle Dick, Rawdon Crosbie turns to the equally characteristic one of "Min," and answers that he is not, at the present moment, aware whether he has had that pleasure.

"Minnie Arundel is her professional name. If you are in the habit of going to the London theatres at all, you must have seen her, particularly about Christmas time. During the summer, Min is generally in the provinces; and, I can tell you, never plays anything under leading lady, even in Liverpool. She is like me, rather, isn't she?"

"Rather," answers Rawdon, hesitatingly. Miss Minnie Arundel's showy stage face, with its professional smile, big eyes, and hair cut short across the forehead, is undeniably like Jane's; but somehow, the likeness pains him. "Your sister is a good deal older than you are, Mrs. Theobald?"

"A year or two, yes; but when she's dressed and lit up, poor Min doesn't look more than eighteen, not an hour more. The girl you are looking at now is Rose Lascelles, and this is Kate Aubrey—as they were, both of them, in my days. We were all taught in one class. And now look at this. I suppose you would never guess who this is?"

She points to a gauze-winged sylphide of the ballet, half-child, half-woman; a sylphide dressed in the airiest of butterfly dresses, and leaning, with grace and buoyancy wonderful for a photograph to reproduce, against a broken column.

"I have never seen you wear wings," says Rawdon, raising his eyes from the photograph to her face, "but the likeness is excellent."

"It *was* like me," Jane answers, a little regretfully; "it was like me, then, in my beauty days. You say you never saw me wear wings. I never did wear them, or any dress belonging to the ballet, except in this photograph. You know I was just coming out, had my engagement signed, and my dress ready and everything, when . . . when I married Mr. Theobald."

"And the photograph was taken as a memento of what might have been?" Rawdon suggests, as she hesitates.

"I suppose so. I was disappointed—just a little—not at getting married" ("getting" married! Rawdon's critical spirit groans), "but at having to throw up my engagement, and so Theobald let me be photographed in my dress, although I wasn't fated to wear it. Well, well, all that's past and done with!" turning over the leaf of the album with a half sigh. "From this point onward you'll find yourself in different company, better company, I suppose I ought to say. Doesn't Theobald photograph well?"—Rawdon is examining a cabinet-size vignette of Jane's handsome husband—"I put him on this page, you see, by himself; a landmark between the old life and the new."

"And Monsieur de Lansac?" Rawdon asks. "Why does he come next. Is Monsieur de Lansac a landmark also?"

"De Lansac comes next because he was my first and best friend after I married," Jane answers coolly. "You will see him a dozen times or more through the book. De Lansac and Blossy appear perpetually, like a chorus. Now you come to the common crowd—all the men I have known during the past four years. The 'army of martyrs,' Theobald calls them."

"And of whom I am to be one?" Rawdon Crosbie asks, in a whisper.

"Of course," she answers, in that hearty voice of hers which is such an antidote to sentiment. "Who are you, that you should escape more than your betters?"

Alas, for Rawdon's vanity! He has not gone far before he discovers that to enter the ranks of Jane's martyrs is no very signal compliment, as far, at least, as social distinction goes. Not only all nations, but all classes are to be found there. Thus, on one page, "Who is this man?" he asks. "I am sure I know his face well in London?"

"That? Let me see: that is the young Marquis of Wastelands," answers Jane, carelessly; "and this queer little mortal by him is Lord Paget Vaurien. Theobald picked them both up in Paris, one winter, and they *would* present me with their photographs."

"And this?"

"This lachrymose-looking gentleman is a Moldavian prince, with a name a foot long, an *écarté* friend of De Lansac's."

"And this?"

"Oh, that is dear old Carl Hofman. He keeps the 'Golden Eagle' in Frankfort."

"And you really honour Mister . . . ah—*Carl Hofman*, by giving him a place in your book?" asks Rawdon, with a certain Brahminical emphasis that is not lost upon Jane.

"Yes, indeed I do. I consider Carl's about the handsomest and nicest face my book contains; as I consider Carl himself one of the handsomest and nicest fellows living. Theobald was ill, very ill, in his house once, and I shall never forget Carl's kindness. He sat up with him at night, he was like a brother to us."

"Ah, that makes all the difference. You may be grateful to a man of that kind without ——"

"Without looking upon him as an associate? But, you see, we did look upon Carl as an associate. He was such excellent company!—could play, sing, do everything. I never spent better evenings than we used to have at the 'Golden Eagle,' when Theobald was recovering. However," she adds, maliciously, "I shouldn't presume to put *you* in such company, Mr. Crosbie. I've got a bishop somewhere—oh, indeed I have! Min gave him to me when she was weeding her book—I don't remember his name, but he is someone very celebrated, who went wrong about the deluge, and I'll put you beside him. Yes, you and a bishop, all by yourselves, on one page."

It was past midnight when Rawdon and Jane danced their last waltz. By the time the book of martyrs is finished they discover, on looking up at the open window, that night is over. A few pale stars still twinkle in the sky, but the sky is already rose-flushed. The blackbirds and thrushes are calling to each other among the distant woods. All at once it occurs to Rawdon, with a shiver, that his mother and Emma may be sitting up for him. He hints that it is time to go.

"Directly," says Jane. "You must have something to eat first. Now, please, let us have no more 'No, thank yous;' this is the hungriest hour of the twenty-four, just as midnight is the thirstiest."

She crosses the room, and opening the door of a gilt and mirrored armoire in a corner, takes out a half-cut *pâté* and a Madeira cake; holding one of which in either hand she returns towards Rawdon. "None of you want anything so commonplace as food, I suppose?" she asks, as she passes by the card-players.

Mr. Theobald is too engrossed to answer. He is waiting, his cards on the table, for Molenos to propose, and the game is four all. De Lansac looks round at Mrs. Theobald, and lays his finger silently on his lips.

"Oh, then we will have our supper, as we have spent our evening, alone," she remarks, addressing Rawdon. "Come to the window, Mr. Crosbie. It's cooler there, and farther from that horrible card-table."

Nothing loth, Rawdon obeys. If his mother and Emma *are* waiting up for him, he reflects, the case is so bad that an hour, more or less, matters not. Jane runs back for wine and glasses from the table beside the *écarté* players, and the *tête-à-tête* supper begins. It is the pleasantest meal Rawdon Crosbie has ever eaten in his life: he is extremely hungry in the first place; the *pâté*, the cake, the wine are good; and he has Jane for his hostess and companion!

"Don't tell anyone we had no plates, or that we eat with our fingers. By 'anyone' I mean your mamma and Miss Marsland. They think badly enough of me as it is! By-the-by, do you think you'll muster moral courage enough to tell them where you have been?"

Rawdon is by no means certain whether he will or not, so demands, warmly, how it is possible Mrs. Theobald can even ask such a question?

"I didn't know. You must remember, Mr. Crosbie, I know very little indeed about you. We are intimate friends, aren't we—well, very nearly intimate, at all events, but still we seem to stand on air. Who are you, really? What are your pleasures? What are your ideas of life? How do you spend your time? Now come and go through your catechism at once, like a good little boy."

Supper is over, and Jane, in her shining silk and laces, is leaning beside the wide-open window. Her face is pale, and a little wearied, but, though the searching light of dawn rests on it full, the perfect complexion shows without a flaw. In Rawdon's sight she looks fairer than she did when she was flushed with spirits, and surrounded by admiration in the ball-room.

"Do you hear? You are to give a full and particular account of yourself; I mean when you have quite done gazing at the stars."

"There are no stars left, Mrs. Theobald, and I don't suppose I should see them if there were."

"Well, when you have quite done gazing at me, then. What is your name? where do you live? *et cetera.*"

"My name is Rawdon Hervey Crosbie. I am a gunner by profession, and have been stationed at Woolwich, Alderney, Plymouth, Portsmouth—chiefly at Portsmouth. I have less duty in some places than in others, and always more time than I know what to do with. Whenever I'm near enough I run up to town as often as I can. Somewhere—Alderney, I think it must have been—I got through Napier's 'History of the Peninsular War.' As a general rule I read a three-volume novel a day. I have no particular ideas about life that I can recollect. It makes a great difference to an artilleryman if he happens to be at a station where he can join a good mess."

Jane opens her blue eyes, and looks at him pityingly. She is, as the reader must have remarked, matter-of-fact to the last degree, and takes the confession without a grain of salt. "And is this all? Good heavens! and have you no

enjoyment in your life? When you go down to Chalkshire, when you are at home with your people, with Miss Marsland, how is it then?"

"Well, we take our food at ten in the morning and at seven in the evening—that is to say, my father and I do; my mother and Emma get in a solid lunch and a five o'clock tea between. And in due season we shoot and hunt, and all the year round we farm a little. We go to whatever parties we are invited to, and twice to church on Sundays. At the present moment I can't remember that we have any other particular enjoyment, unless it is croquet in summer and whist in winter."

"And when you go to London?"

"Oh, I knock about as most people do then."

"But those are the best times you ever have, surely!"

After reflection, Rawdon answers, Yes; he has probably got more out of his life in London than elsewhere. Still, even in London, it is difficult for a man at all times to know what to do with himself.

"Difficult!" exclaims Jane. "Difficult to know what to do with oneself in London? What a pity you have never met me there! We live, as I've told you, abroad, but twice a year regularly, sometimes oftener, we wake up—without intending it, Theobald says—and find ourselves in London. You ought to be with us (with me and Min, I mean) if you don't know what to do with your time! Perhaps we might manage to meet there before long. When are you going to leave this for England?"

"Not for a day or two, I hope," answers Rawdon; "to-morrow, I fear." He has growing forebodings that his mother and Emma will bear him bodily away, as soon as possible, from the enemy's camp. "We only ran over to Bonn for a fortnight's change, and returned this way to show Emma the outside of a foreign spa."

"And have seen wickedness enough already to be frightened away?"

"Not exactly that. The truth is, I think, the Crosbie family were never intended by Nature for travelling. My mother thinks the servants are burning the house down every night, regularly; my father goes wild at the thought of the hay getting itself in without him. I—I," he turns red and hesitates, "should like to know where I may find you out in London, Mrs. Theobald?"

"Well, Theobald belongs to the Rag, but the surest way always to hear of me is at the Theatre Royal, from Uncle Dick. We shall only be able to stay a few hours in town this time," she adds. "We are going down straight into the country to take possession of our property. This day fortnight—how grand it sounds!—we shall be Mr. and Mrs. Theobald, of Theobalds, Chalkshire."

"And our next-door neighbours. I hope you won't be too grand to admit me if I call."

"If! You are wise to put in the proviso," says poor Jane.

It is past three o'clock when Rawdon leaves the Theobalds' rooms. The *écarté* players are still shuffling, cutting, dealing, dealing, cutting, shuffling, with the same freshness as when they began at midnight, and likelier than not, says Jane, will continue to do so until breakfast time. She comes with Rawdon to the door and stands a minute or two there, chatting to him in whispers—he carries away an ineffaceable picture of her with the flush of morning resting upon her soft face, her white dress, upon the half-dead roses in her hair—— At the last angle on the staircase from whence the Theobalds' door is visible he turns, and Jane, before she vanishes, sends him a kiss from the tips of her fingers. Then, with much the same feelings as a schoolboy who has been out after hours, and dreads to meet his master, Rawdon Crosbie makes his way up noiselessly towards his own room upon the third floor.

If he can only reach it unheard, who shall say that he did not come back, virtuously and direct from the ball? With stealthy tread he prepares to pass the door of Mr. and Mrs. Crosbie's apartment on the second floor; he has all but reached it, he holds himself safe, when—the door opens, sudden and wide, and a figure appears before him; a figure in a loose chintz wrapper, but with a head dignified and erect—a head from which the black lace, the chignon of yesterday, have not been unpinned—a head that has unmistakably "sat up" all night: Mrs. Crosbie.

She takes a step forward, and Rawdon has no choice but to stop short. And so they confront each other: Mrs. Crosbie in the hybrid attire aforesaid, her eyes and cheek haggard from watching; young Rawdon in his evening dress, his opera-hat under his arm, the rose (Jane's gift) in his button-hole, a quite unwonted glow of brightness, the reflection probably of all the happy hours he has been spending, upon his face.

"What, mother, up already?"

"You have been in those people's rooms, Rawdon. Don't deny it! don't stoop to deny it! You have stayed till this disgraceful hour with Mrs. Theobald, and Emma and myself under the same roof!"

Well, I can't precisely say how it is, but either the tone of the accusation, or the general effect of his mother's figure, or both, take a fatal effect on Rawdon's fancy, and he bursts into a laugh. It is indefensible, undutiful, but for the life of him he cannot help it; nay, when he tries to choke the ill-timed levity back it does but redouble. At three in the morning you will often see this hysterical kind of affection in persons solemn as judges at all other times.

"I've spent the evening with the Theobalds, and a very jolly evening too," he remarks as soon as he can speak at all.

Mrs. Crosbie looks at him with growing horror and disgust. "I will not address you further now, sir. You are not in a *fit state* to be addressed." And although he knows that he has in reality only partaken of a slice of *pâté*, of some Madeira cake, of two glasses of light Rhenish wine, the awful emphasis of Mrs.

Crosbie's voice makes Rawdon almost ask himself whether he is or is not sober. "To-morrow I should say to-day, for it is broad daylight already—I will hear what excuses you have to offer for yourself."

"Excuses, my dear mother? Why, what in the world are you talking about? I have spent the evening, and a very jolly evening, too, with the Theobalds, as I hope to spend a great many more with them if I live——"

"Rawdon!"

"I'm not a schoolboy any longer, you know, mother. I really am old enough to be master of my own time."

"And our position? The position in which such conduct places us——"

"Juliana, my dear," cries out the sleepy voice of old Crosbie from within; "don't you think you had better go to your bed, and leave the boy alone? This isn't the time of day for argument."

"Nor is Rawdon in a state to listen to it," says Mrs. Crosbie, with another withering look at her son. However, she has wisdom enough to follow her husband's advice, and withdraws; shutting the door, with all the righteous sternness of outraged parental authority, full in the delinquent's face.

Rawdon runs, two steps at a time, up to the next floor, puts his rosebud tenderly in water, and long before Mrs. Crosbie's head has reached its pillow, falls asleep and dreams of the Grande Duchesse waltzes, and of Jane.

CHAPTER IX

BLOSSY'S DEPLORABLE PASSIONS

He wakes, a good many hours later, in that state of utter moral collapse which seems the stipulated payment to-morrow has to make for all human happy over-nights. He fell asleep with music in his heart and brain, with a fair woman's hand upon his shoulder, a sweet woman's breath upon his cheek. He wakes, and his watch tells him it is a couple of hours past the usual breakfast hour, and he remembers that Jane is the wife of Francis Theobald (and the intimate associate of Monsieur de Lansac) and that he is nothing to her! The ball and those three hours in the Theobald's rooms, and the dreams that followed, are all unrealities, things gone by and done with for ever. And he must get up and dress, and join the people who belong to him, and face his destiny: must go on with life.

When he comes downstairs he finds the breakfast equipage still upon the table, and Emma Marsland diligently looking over "Bradshaw," while she writes down labyrinthine rows of figures on a slip of paper. A bundle of wraps, strapped, and his father's hat-box, are in one corner of the room; Mrs. Crosbie's travelling-bag is on a chair beside the window.

"Rawdon! down at last! Do you know what time it is, sir?"

Miss Marsland runs to meet him, her kind little plump hands outstretched, and Rawdon stoops and kisses her. She is not beautiful; she is not Jane; but her smiling face of welcome picks up his spirits somewhat. Anything to a lad of Rawdon's age is better than a lecture. After anticipating a family conclave, to find himself alone with Emma, and to find Emma good-tempered and forgiving, comes to him in the nature of a reprieve.

"Mamma thought the tea would keep warm enough, but I know how you hate half-cold things, so I rang for fresh as soon as Lucy told me you were getting up. If you hadn't stirred by eleven, we decided we must call you; for—I hope you won't mind it, Rawdon, but we are going away to-day."

"Oh, are we, indeed?" says Rawdon, trying not to look as blank as he feels. "And pray, what is the reason of this sudden exodus?"

"Well, mamma seems to think it will be best; and you know, Rawdon, how anxious your father is about the hay."

"But that is no reason why we should go, Emmy. We are not anxious about the hay. Let them do as they like, and you and I will stop in Spa and enjoy ourselves."

Before Emma can recover herself from the shock of this horrible, this delightful proposal sufficiently to answer, Rawdon's breakfast is brought in. She crosses to the table, pours out his tea, helps him to the liberal cream and sugar that his soul loves, then stands, with her eyes downcast, and more colour than usual in her face, tracing little imaginary patterns on the tablecloth with her finger.

"You have got something disagreeable to say, Emmy. Oh, but I know you have! Whenever people make fortresses of bread-crumbs, it shows their minds are not at rest. Now, out with it! You'll be better afterwards."

"I—oh, Rawdon, I'm so afraid you'll be cross; but mamma got it out of me, and you know we never could have kept it a secret long."

"Kept what a secret?"

"Rawdon!"

Miss Marsland's lips quiver, and with a pang of self-reproach Rawdon remembers the love-scene in the woods. He remembers everything!

"You are not, say you are not angry with me," she pleads, watching his face. "I couldn't help it. Mamma has such a way of searching one's very thoughts, and it all came out, somehow, about Mrs. Theobald. She looked so dreadfully annoyed, poor mamma, at breakfast, and—and I didn't know how to defend you, Rawdon, and then I told them *that*. It seems a very vain speech, but I knew it was the one way to please mamma, and it has pleased her—oh, so much, and your father, too."

Rawdon Crosbie drinks half a cup of tea and butters himself a roll. "And when are we to be married, Emmy? Angry, my dear, why should I be angry?" He holds out his hand,

and she takes and clings to it. "You had a perfect right to do as you liked, and, as you say, nothing that two people know can be a secret long. When is it to be, Emmy? Of course my mother has decided everything."

"Of course, nothing of the kind, sir. It will be only an engagement for I don't know how long yet." In her heart Emma has fixed upon the second week of August. "Papa says my other guardian's consent must be asked; my cousin, Mr. Mason, you know, in Jamaica. But that can only be a matter of form, I'm sure. And then there will be the trousseau and bridesmaids, and everything else to think of. Oh, Rawdon, won't it be funny, you and me going back engaged? I wonder what all the Chalkshire people will say?"

Rawdon, failing, it would seem, to grasp the humour of the situation, does not offer any guesses on the subject, but, gradually freeing his hand from that of his betrothed, goes on with his breakfast. He feels in the very flattest of spirits he has experienced during his whole not too-highly pitched life; reaction after the ball, perhaps, to start with, superadded to this the weight of his avowed, legitimate, to-be-congratulated engagement, and now, crowning all, the conviction that he is defeated! The conviction that Jane and his short, sweet, opening friendship for her are nowhere, and his mother and Emmy, and all the whole humdrum responsibilities and blessings of his lot, in fullest possession of the field.

"Yes, it was certainly *apropos* of Mrs. Theobald that it began," says Emma, presently. "I don't think I ever saw mamma so thoroughly cut up before; and really and truly, Rawdon, I must say mamma was right. Now was it, was it nice of you, to be at an uproarious party, and us on the floor above, till three in the morning?"

Miss Marsland lays due emphasis on the word "uproarious." Rawdon remembers the Theobalds' room, with its silent *écarté* players, and Jane and himself whispering in the moonlight over their supper. "Uproarious! I came home with the Theobalds from the ball, and stopped to have a glass of wine in their rooms. Emmy, by the way, whatever you may do hereafter as to the rest, *don't* take one leaf out of my mother's book. Don't sit up for me! I think I could be driven into any crime," says Rawdon, looking ferociously miserable, "by a wife who sat up for me."

"I hope you'll never want sitting up for then," says Emma, discreetly. "When you go out anywhere, of course I shall go too. As to your being with the Theobalds, last night, I can only say I did feel hurt, and I cried; yes, Rawdon, I cried to think you could take pleasure either in the ball or in their society. I'm not of a jealous disposition——"

"Oh, not in the least," remarks Rawdon, grimly jocular.

"But as it is not proper for me to know a person like Mrs. Theobald, why——"

"Go on, my love."

"Why, I don't think, now we are engaged, that it is proper for you. I'm sure I don't want to say anything against her—her moral character, I mean; but she is not a lady—now, is she?"

"Really, Emma, I am no judge. She is a very well-mannered woman, and has more to say for herself than most people. That is all I know."

"And you would like me now, or hereafter, to be intimate with her?"

"You are echoing my mother in all this, Emma," answers Rawdon, shifting his position. "What question is there of your being intimate with Mrs. Theobald? She is not especially anxious, that I know of, for the distinction of our family's patronage."

"Well, no," remarks Miss Marsland, drawing an envelope from her pocket. "Mrs. Theobald has taken pretty good care to show us, me and mamma, I mean, the value she sets on our good opinion! You remember my giving the child an ornament off my guard yesterday, and it was that nice little fish Mr. Mason sent me once, with real emeralds for eyes. Well, here it is, returned! Just wrapped in a sheet of paper, you see, put into an envelope, and directed 'To Miss Marsland.' And without a word of apology, too!"

Rawdon Crosbie takes the envelope and its contents, and examines them curiously. So this is Jane's handwriting—quite a commonplace schoolgirl hand, reader; but Rawdon sees a new revelation of character in every upstroke. "To Miss Marsland. Number fourteen." He reads aloud, in an absent sort of way.

"Yes, 'To Miss Marsland, number fourteen,' and not a word of explanation," repeats Emma. "As mamma says, after I had been good-natured enough to give it to the child, Mrs. Theobald might at least have apologised for sending it back."

"Certainly," Rawdon acquiesces, gravely. "After having been mistaken for the Princess Czartoriska, and cut as soon as the mistake was discovered, the very least Mrs. Theobald could have offered us would have been an apology. But some people have no delicacy of feeling."

"I'm glad you see it as we see it," cries Emma, upon whom Rawdon's small irony is lost. "But perhaps, charitably, we ought to set her conduct down to ignorance? It *would* have been difficult for her to say 'with compliments,' or 'kind regards.'"

"After having her acquaintance declined only the day before," adds Rawdon. "So it would, Emmy, rather."

He laughs aloud; Emma, not knowing how to take him in his present mood, laughs too; and just at this moment in comes Mr. Crosbie. Ah! the spirits, the happiness of these poor children, he thinks, looking pityingly at the faces of the two young lovers. Will they laugh as loud when they have been married a dozen years? Mr. Crosbie gives his bald head a shake full of

mournful premonition, and crossing the room lays his hand kindly on his son's shoulder.

And Rawdon knows that he has received his father's congratulations. In situations where a father and son of any other nation would find room for a score of pretty little dramatic effects, six commonplace words, a shake of the hand, a clasp of the shoulder, are sufficiently expansive demonstrations for two phlegmatic Britons. Rawdon Crosbie knows that he is congratulated, his engagement paternally ratified. He can see himself standing, an automaton in an embroidered waistcoat, before the altar of Lidlington church, the shining old rector, and a couple of shining curates, busily tying him, till death them shall part, to Miss Marsland. Bridegroom, best man, bouquets; bridesmaids in sky-blue, matrons in mauve satin—by one instinctive, prophetic stretch of the imagination Rawdon can see it all. And in the background, to make the picture complete, a mischievous fair face, a pair of mocking blue eyes, perhaps watching the ceremony with amusement.

"I have been giving Rawdon a good lecture, papa," says Emma, prettily, "trying my best to make him promise to be a better boy for the future."

"Ah, never lecture, my dear Emma," answers poor old Crosbie, almost solemnly. "Never lecture any man, and never make any man promise anything. A woman's proper weapon is sub——; ahem, yes," the entrance of Mrs. Crosbie, robed for travelling, abruptly cutting him short. "Submission to the inevitable is the first duty of us all," he adds. Then, meekly, betakes himself to strapping together wraps, and tying on labels, nor speaks again out of monosyllables till he and Rawdon are smoking the pipe of retrospection together that night in Brussels.

Mrs. Crosbie's congratulations are offered after a very different fashion to her husband's. She advances, with elegant effusion, to Rawdon's side, puts an arm round his neck, in a few well-chosen words "forgives" him his last night's crime, hopes that he will prove himself worthy of one who already occupies *a daughter's* place in his parents' hearts! Tears swim, with dignity, in Mrs. Crosbie's eyes; they well over in Emma's, who cries, "Oh, mamma, mamma, how can you?" and is finally obliged to take out her pocket-handkerchief. Rawdon feels like stone. He calls himself a monster, he tries to rouse his graceless heart into sentiment, nay into ordinary, decent human feeling, and fails. Luckily Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are too much occupied with their own emotions to analyse his; luckily, too, one of the waiters enters before long to say that in another quarter of an hour the Pepinster char-à-banc will be at the door.

"And unless I and my things are to be left behind, I must go and pack them at once," says Rawdon, devoutly wishing such a consummation may arrive. He runs off to his room, rapidly turning over the possibilities of escape as he runs, and finds—that fate and Mrs. Crosbie's maid have been too much for him. His dressing-case is packed; the evening suit he wore last night neatly folded in his portmanteau, waiting only for him to turn the key. All that remains now is to submit, bid a hurried good-bye to Mrs. Theobald, and be carried off at once to his lawful happiness, and the village wedding, and the shining rector and curates in Lidlington church! He descends the stairs swiftly (may not his mother be again in wait for him?), gets safely past the second floor, and knocks at the Theobald door. A step is heard crossing the room—how Rawdon's heart beats—the lock turns, and instead of Jane's slim figure he sees the yard-wide waist of the Belgian nurse.

Her French is pretty much on a par with Rawdon's, who has enjoyed the usual linguistic teaching of a thorough English education during ten years or so of his youth. But when does bad news fail to convey itself intelligibly? Mr. and Mrs. Theobald have gone away to breakfast in the woods. They may be back at two, three—who knows? The French gentleman, their friend, is with them, and will Monsieur like to leave any message?

Monsieur feels his heart is in his mouth, so ridiculously poignant is his disappointment. Gone away to breakfast in the woods! And with De Lansac! He detests Mrs. Theobald and everything belonging to her; he despises himself for having wished to see her again. The door stands wide open, and he looks drearily round the pretty sunlit room. He sees the corner where Jane showed him her book of martyrs, the window where they ate Madeira cake, and were happy in the moonlight. A work-box, and some scraps of lace and ribbon, are on a table near at hand. Her presence is everywhere.

"Will Monsieur leave a message, a card?" repeats the Belgian, looking up with stolid scrutiny at the young Englishman's face.

"Je laisse *mon* carte," says Rawdon. Then, taking out his card-case, he discovers he has no pencil wherewith to write his P.P.C. The Belgian, however, divining what he wants, signs to him to come in, and pointing to her mistress's open work-box, says the word "crayon." Just then a vigorous shout makes itself heard from the interior of the bedroom; Mees Bébé awakening from her noontide sleep. The nurse runs away, prompt to whip or comfort, as the case may demand, and Rawdon is left alone.

After some search he finds a pencil, duly writes the conventional absurdity upon a couple of cards for Mr. and Mrs. Theobald; then, instead of wisely escaping from the room and its recollections at once, falls to examining all the different little trinkets and bits of feminine rubbish Jane's box contains. Here is a morsel of blue ribbon, the same ribbon, he could swear, that she wore when he first saw her yesterday; and here is an old-fashioned silver amulet, heart-shaped, and scented by a Vanilla bean inside; and here, carefully stored in a corner by themselves, are a dozen or so dead rose leaves.

Rawdon thinks it would be no great crime to possess himself of these, keep them, wear them—yes, in the pocket of that very embroidered waistcoat that shall face the rector and both curates in Lidlington church; then, with sudden chill, he remembers that they may, nay, that they must be, a memento of some hour in which he had no part. Does not their colour tell they died longer ago than yesterday? Well, but that desire of stealing *something* that once belonged to Jane has entered his heart, and he has not the moral courage necessary to put it away. A patter of bare feet, a loud "I sall! I sall!" is heard from the inner room. If he means to commit the deed at all, it behoves him to lose no time about it. He hesitates, and the temptation grows stronger ——; another instant, and the little silver heart (Jane's dearest possession: if he only knew how dear a one!) is feloniously transferred to Rawdon Crosbie's waistcoat pocket. Open flies the bedroom door, and in rushes Blossy, in the lightest of baby *déshabille*, her feet, her neck bare, her yellow curls disordered, a nightcap, of the ridiculous shape that children wear abroad, on one side of her head; the most delicious little figure for a baby Greuze imaginable.

She flies to Rawdon—the nurse, who follows, vainly striving to throw a frock, lasso-fashion, her head—and takes refuge in his arms. He knows nothing whatever about children of her age; indeed, connecting them always in his mind with schoolrooms and village treats, dislikes them on principle. But who could feel Blossy Theobald's lips upon his cheek and not fall in love with her? Rawdon does on the spot—he has, it must be confessed, pretty wide capabilities of this kind! And when, two minutes later, he goes back dutifully to his betrothed, such improvement in spirits and temper is visible in him as at once gives the poor little heiress's heart food for suspicion.

"You have been saying good-bye to Mrs. Theobald, Rawdon?"

"I have been leaving my P.P.C. on Mr. and Mrs. Theobald, Emmy. They were out, and the only person I saw was your friend, the small child."

He puts his arm round her, guiltily conscious of his latest infidelity, and the heiress reposes her face affectionately on his waistcoat. Mr. and Mrs. Crosbie have gone to dispute the bill, and it is the lovers' last moment together before starting.

"Oh, Rawdon, what a dandy you are getting!" Her nose is within an inch and a half of Jane's amulet. "What is this new scent you wear? and what put it into your head to buy it?"

"I never bought a bottle of scent in my life, Emmy. It must be these foreign fusees. I believe I have a box of them about me, somewhere."

"Oh, indeed. Fusees! I never knew any fusees smell so sweet before. I remember the time when you used to say you despised men who wore scents."

"My dear Emmy," replies Rawdon, sagely, "I've quite left off despising people for being fools. It's a bad habit, a habit that leads one into being personal."

Well, the moment for departure arrives, and the Crosbie family take their places in the Pepinster char-à-banc. Cric-crac goes the driver's whip; another moment, and Spa, and the new keen taste of life he has experienced there, will be things of the past to Rawdon Crosbie. He glances up at certain windows of the first-floor, to wish a mental good-bye to someone who stood there last night, and sees a small figure kissing its hand to him vehemently.

"Dood-bye, dood-bye," shouts Blossy, whom the Belgian nurse holds aloft in her arms upon the balcony.

Emma on this looks up, and then Mrs. Crosbie. She is a little near-sighted—not blind, like Francis Theobald, but sufficiently so, on occasion, to warrant that aid and maintenance to dignity, a double eyeglass. She draws forth and adjusts her double eyeglass now.

"A nice-looking child, positively a nice-looking child, Emma, is she not?" This little Christian concession to human weakness Mrs. Crosbie thinks it right under the happily-altered circumstances, to make. "Dood-bye, my dear," elevating her voice, playfully, "*dood*-bye." And, carried away by the charitable impulses of the moment, Mrs. Crosbie actually so far forgets herself as to waft a kiss, from the extreme tips of her gloved fingers, to Jane Theobald's child.

And now occurs a really remarkable phenomenon, considering Blossy Theobald's age and circumstances. At the unexpected sight of these two ladies, Emma smiling, Mrs. Crosbie hand-kissing, the child in a second becomes scarlet. "Mein Fiss!" she screams, "Mein Fiss!" Then doubles up her dimpled fists in the most belligerent of attitudes, and shakes them with rage, straight in the direction of Mrs. Crosbie's face. The Belgian nurse, shocked at such a display of temper towards ladies dressed in fine green and blue silks, attempts blandishment, and receives instant punishment on her face and ears in return.

"Mein Fiss, mein Fiss!" shrieks Blossy, as though she would invoke heaven and earth to come to the rescue.

Put yourself in her place, mature reader. She went to sleep last night, the ravished possessor of a real silver fish, with emerald eyes, with movable tail. She awoke this morning with a paper of sweets, paltry substitute, miserable bribe, beneath her pillow; her fish gone, her mother telling her that he had swum away in the night, because the ladies wanted him back again. And now she sees them—these brigands, these destroyers of her happiness—smiling and kissing their hands, as though to give a fish one day and lure him away the next were quite a trivial thing. Why, if Blossy's strength but matched her childish rage, her maddened sense of injustice, she would willingly

tear both of them to pieces with those small hands of hers on the spot.

"What deplorable passions, or rather what a deplorable bringing up," says Mrs. Crosbie, with her slow, soft smile, as she doubles up her eyeglass. "Rawdon used to fly into just those sorts of senseless rages till I cured him of them."

"I doubt if Miss Theobald could be cured easily," remarks Emma, giving a last look at the little blue-eyed fury overhead.

"My dear Emma, education can cure anything. In six months I would undertake to eradicate the evil even of *that* child's natural heart. Education, system, strictness——"

The char-à-banc moves on with a jerk, and Blossy continues to bestow gestures of bitterest anathema upon its occupants till they are out of sight.

"And so, adieu to Spa!" whispers Miss Marsland, sentimentally, to her lover, as they turn from the last street of the village into the open country road. "Dear little Spa! I shall always look back to our stay here as an oasis in life, shan't you, Rawdon?"

Rawdon is silent. He is in one of those impressionable moods when we are apt to regard the lightest accident as a portent, a "delicate omen traced in air," either for good or evil; and the child's parting maledictions seem to him—child that he is himself—to be fraught with untoward augury of all kinds for the future.

CHAPTER X

FADED DAFFODILS

The future!

—"Yes," says Miss Charlotte Theobald, with spiteful prescience, "there's the rub. The present will all go smooth enough, as long as they have poor James's money to make ducks and drakes of—but the future! What future, what hopes, either for his child or himself, can a man have who has made such a marriage as our brother Francis?"

"Especially if he doesn't keep his health," rejoins the elder sister mournfully. "Francis always had a poor digestion. The same feeble action of the liver as ——"

"Feeble action of the fiddle-strings, Annie! Francis has got his share of the Theobald laziness, or he would never have been cajoled into marrying the woman he did. But don't talk to me of bad health. A man leading the life of dissipation his has been and *living* still!"

"Ah, it takes a great deal to kill people, however delicate they are," remarks the eldest Miss Theobald, thinking, perhaps, of herself, and of all the years she has survived her sister Charlotte's bitter tongue. "Look at our cousin James. He never really digested a meal for twenty years——"

"And then died in a minute, with his old will torn up, the new one not signed, and leaving his property to the man he most wished in the world to disinherit—our brother Francis! So much for your invalids!" Miss Charlotte's tone of disgust expresses more, even, than her words. "Catch a man in honest health, a man with a digestion, making such a muddle at the last as that!"

"But ought we to call it a muddle, Charlotte? It might be more comfortable, certainly, if we didn't live in the immediate neighbourhood; still, as it *has* pleased Providence to remove poor James to a better sphere, is it not better our brother should come into the property than a stranger? There's more chance of their settling down respectably now that Francis ha a house and position of his own than there was before."

"Ah! You think so." I represent by full stops certain curious interjectional sniffs on the part of Miss Charlotte Theobald. "Then let me tell you, Annie, your remark only betrays your usual gross ignorance of human nature. Position, to a woman like Mrs. Francis Theobald, will be . . . a thing to laugh at and degrade—an opportunity of dragging us deeper into the mire than she has dragged us already. As long as they were too poor to live in England we might pretend to forget, might flatter ourselves that our friends forget, the connection. For the future we shall have it in daily, hourly evidence before our eyes. You should have heard Mrs. Pippin's voice to-day as she congratulated me on my brother's return. 'So very agreeable, would it not be, for us to have him as a neighbour?' And now it appears the Crosbies met them—met them, and of course wouldn't know her—abroad."

"Dear, dear, you don't mean to say that, Charlotte! Well, now, I call it very unkind of the Crosbies. I'm sure, for our sainted mother's sake, the hospitality they have met with from our family, they might——"

"Annie!" interrupts the younger sister, sternly. "Once and for all, let me tell you that that sort of sentimental talk is bosh!" It is Charlotte Theobald's habit to flavour her discourse with somewhat masculine and nervous turns of expression. "As long as our mother lived and gave dinners the world was civil to her. And when she died, and could give dinners no longer, the world forgot her—the Crosbies with the rest. Men and women are judged on their own merits, not by the kind of dinners their fathers and mothers gave before them. Francis Theobald will be looked upon in this neighbourhood just as Brown, Jones, or Robinson would be, if Brown, Jones, or Robinson happened to have married a ballet-girl. Eight o'clock! I should like to know whether they are coming or whether they are not!"

And Charlotte Theobald looks forth with a snappish eye along the dreary road which leads from the Lidlington railway station, two miles and a half distant, to Theobalds.

Theobalds. Yes, this is Jane's land of promise, the English country house in which Blossy is to grow up, the house in which, for the first time since their marriage, Francis Theobald and his wife are to taste the sweets of a settled habitation and a name. Summer is now at her prime. (Ten days have passed since Jane and Rawdon met at Spa.) The weather is delicious, the hour the fairest one of the twenty-four. But Theobalds looks and feels like a tomb. When could Theobalds look or feel otherwise? A two-storied grey stone house, built on the northern slope of a hill, trees overshadowing it, back and front; for enlivenment, the cawing of a rookery; for prospect, a sweep of unfrequented carriage-road and a pond, or imitation lake, covered with duckweed. . . . Such is Francis Theobald's inheritance, such "the jolly home-like old place" to which Jane, accustomed all her life to the colour, and stir, and variety of streets, is now on her way.

To the Miss Theobalds, whose best, because whose youngest, days were spent here, the house is a very monument of all things dignified and to be desired. Could not Theobalds make up twenty beds if it had visitors, which it never has, and if the visitors were indifferent on the score of smoky chimneys? Does not the drawing-room possess one of the finest carved ceilings in Chalkshire? Is there not a servants' hall proper—not a mere housekeeper's room, as you find in the second class of country houses—a servants' hall, a priest's room, and a ghost? That every other chimney in the house smokes, that the sitting-rooms face north, and are lower than the level of the earth, that no amount of fire, winter or summer, can keep down the smell of dry-rot, and neither cat nor trap subdue the legions of rats—these are facts, certainly, at which strangers may take umbrage, but which to the Miss Theobalds are merely like the plain, never-to-be-changed features of a face we love; facts disagreeable in themselves, perhaps, but unalterable, and against which no Christian and no Theobald would rebel.

As with the house, so with the furniture. The room in which the sisters now await Francis and his wife is the drawing-room with the carved ceiling. A long narrow room, dark even on a summer noonday, and at all times a perfect epitome of bad taste and ugliness; the paper a dingy chocolate; dingy chocolate curtains, draped in the ponderous mode of a bygone generation, across the windows; one solitary looking-glass hung high above the hideous clock upon the mantelpiece; a "centre table," drear relic of antiquity, placed with mathematical correctness in the middle of the room; high-backed chairs ranged stiffly along the walls. But the Miss Theobalds no more dispute it all than they would dispute the Pentateuch. They are aware, they confess, that the furniture is not modern: cousin James was a bachelor, and did not trouble himself as to the date of his upholstery. But at least there is no veneer about it. It is good; it is a part of Theobalds; part, that is to say, of their own old-fashioned flesh and blood prejudices! Not without a secret satisfaction do they look forward to the moment when Jane, poor creature, accustomed as she must be to the discomforts of carpetless foreign inns, shall enter her husband's early home and view the solid mahogany and rosewood, the Kidderminster and damask, that await her in a life of respectability. She will be taken aback, naturally, until she gets used to her position, and Miss Anne, who, as far as dyspepsia and laziness allow, is really not unamiable, has already prepared in her own mind a little patronising speech by which she will endeavour to set the humbly-born, roughly-nurtured sister-in-law at her ease.

"I dare say we shall see a good deal of change in our brother, Charlotte." Five more minutes have been ticked into their grave by the hideous clock on the mantelpiece, and still no sound of carriage-wheels breaks the silence. "It is six years since we saw him last, and six years make a difference at his age. Let me see," Miss Theobald folds her hands and calculates blandly; "Francis is just twelve years younger than you, Charlotte! for poor mamma had given away all her baby-clothes, never thinking there would be any more of us. Francis will be thirty-two years old the tenth of next January."

"I do wish," remarks Miss Charlotte, tartly, "I do wish, Anne, you would keep your chronologies to yourself. Because you happen to be as indifferent to your age as you are to everything else, is no reason younger people are to have their baptismal registry thrust in their faces a dozen times a day. Remember Francis's birthday by your own, please, or by any other date you choose, so long as it is unconnected with me."

The elder Miss Theobald is a stout, dusty-complexioned woman of about fifty. When she is not in crape and bombazine, as at present, she passes her harmless existence in dust-coloured silks, and, for more years than she can remember, has taken dust-coloured, or canvas-side-of-the-carpet views of all mortal hopes and happiness. A woman occupied, primarily, with globules, and little books on indigestion; secondly, with supporting the tempers and bullying of her sister Charlotte. Not a bad sort of human soul in the main. A human soul undecided, after fifty years, as to the effect of potash and bismuth on the coats of the stomach, and humbly speculative (on Sunday afternoons) as to what the kingdom of heaven will be like if poor dear Charlotte should happen to get there as well as herself.

Miss Charlotte, her sister's junior by several years, is still young enough—and will remain young enough till she dies—to care for dress: so far I would incline towards rating her as a better woman than Miss Theobald. She is plain, exceedingly, as you will often remark of the sisters of handsome men; but dresses with such choice care, such perfection of trim neatness, as render her slight figure and smooth dark hair not

unpleasing to the eye. In her youth, it is said, someone loved Charlotte Theobald; certainly no one loves her now; and equally certainly she loves no one. Above all do young and attractive married women rouse her indignation. "Flaunting their faces before men, when they should be at home, darning socks, in their nursery. As if girls did not do mischief enough in the world without *their* example!" She dislikes men, women, babies: dislikes herself! Knows, by experience, that life is inherently disagreeable, and does her best, on principle, to keep up its character. Charlotte Theobald frequently expresses her belief that she has "a moral back-bone." She prides herself on her honesty; her capacity of saying, to every man's face, what she would say in his absence. Ruin yourself, and Charlotte, if you belong to the family, will stand by you, but in such an attitude as almost to make you prefer ruin to salvation. Prosper, and a quarter of an hour of her society will cause prosperity to taste bitter as Dead Sea fruit in your mouth. You feel that she must be of use; that so many pungent, fermenting properties must fulfil some end in the great economy of nature. But what is it? Well, when you were five years old, you used to ask the same question about wasps and earwigs, and were told that there were certain facts that must be accepted, not reasoned about. Charlotte Theobald is one of these facts.

"Ten minutes and a half past eight," she remarks, turning, after another pause, and looking at the clock. "You may do as you choose, Anne. Keep the brougham until whatever hour suits you. At the quarter I walk home. Railway accidents? Stuff! People like Francis Theobald and his wife never come to bodily harm."

And the generalisation proves correct. Scarcely have the words left Miss Charlotte's lips, when the sound of wheels is heard. Another minute, and a carriage containing Theobald, his wife, and child, all in perfect health and spirits, approaches, at a rapid pace, towards the house.

"The gravel!" sighs Anne Theobald, as she moves slowly across to the window. "I must speak to Francis about the gravel. Cousin James never allowed any furious driving along the avenue."

"And another carriage with luggage behind!" adds Miss Charlotte, peering sourly round the window-curtain. "What reckless extravagance!—when Smith could have brought it, at a quarter the price, in his cart to-morrow! If this is the way Francis is beginning! ——"

Francis is beginning in the same delightfully confident and placid spirit with which he inaugurates every fresh start in his perpetually-starting life. The first thing, on reaching the station at Lidlington, was, naturally, to hire the best conveyance the town possessed; the next to drive to the principal hotel and order the best bottle of champagne it could furnish. After this came the drive through the pleasant country lanes, the sunset turning the land, and flowery hedges, and Blossy's face to gold. And Jane sang aloud as they drove, and Theobald smoked, and the driver, who also had had his glass of champagne, kept his horses up to their best pace, and all the world seemed fair to them, and full of movement and cheerfulness and hope! Now they have reached home; and the two daffodil sisters, who ate their solitary dinner at two, and have drunk no champagne, and felt no sunshine, watch them, chill and critical, from behind the window-curtains.

"What—what a set they look!" exclaims Miss Charlotte, below her breath, as the carriage stops. She is unacquainted with the word "rowdy," or, I am certain, would have employed it here. "If anyone we know should have met them!"

Jane, in an airy summer dress, is sitting without her hat, and has a hand clasped upon her husband's shoulder, as she looks up, with her bright young face, at the sombre house that is to be her home. A pipe is between Mr. Theobald's lips. Blossy, in wild excitement, cries "Huzza! huzza!" waving up and down a great branch of honeysuckle which some country children flung into the carriage as they came along.

"A pipe!" says the elder sister, with faint horror, and raising her handkerchief before her nose. "Oh! if our dear mother could have seen this! A pipe in daylight!"

"And as I live," cries Charlotte, starting forth from her lair behind the curtains, as the disgraceful truth breaks full upon her—"as I live—coming into our own parish, and with our cousin James scarce cold in his grave—*they are not in mourning!*"

CHAPTER XI

JANE'S FIRST TASTE OF RESPECTABILITY

The travellers enter the gloomy sitting-room, bringing in with them the freshness and sunshine of the outer world, and happily unconscious that a family reunion awaits them. Jane's hand is upon her husband's arm; she is laughing merrily and loud. Blossy, brandishing aloft her honeysuckle, with shouts of purposeless glee, knocks down a valuable Chinese mandarin from his bracket before she has taken half-a-dozen steps. Two sable-clad figures advance, at a funereal pace, to meet them; and Mr. Theobald, admonished by the pressure of Jane's fingers, puts up his eyeglass, and recognises—his sisters.

"Anne—Charlotte, how good of you to come over! I didn't see you for the moment—getting blinder than ever, I'm sorry to say, in my old age. How are you both?"

They fold him in a stony embrace, and Miss Theobald remarks that it is six years since they met last. Then there is silence. Miss Charlotte

is looking steadily at Jane; Jane, illogical, but right as usual, is deciding that she will have fewer friends by two than she had counted on in Chalkshire. Blossy, with open eyes and mouth, is recovering from the downfall of the mandarin, and taking such general stock as her limited powers permit of everything.

"And here are my wife and child," says Mr. Theobald, neither of the ladies offering to speak or move. "Jenny," putting his arm around his wife's waist, and so drawing her forward, "these are my sisters."

The introduction thus formally gone through, the Miss Theobalds perform their duty, by successively taking Jane's hand and touching her cheek with their lips. Cold, lifeless, void of flesh and blood are the salutes; but Jane wants, for the child's sake rather than her own, to conciliate her husband's people, and receives them graciously.

"It is very kind of you to be here to meet us," she remarks, for safety following Mr. Theobald's lead.

"It is not likely we should leave the house in the hands of new servants," observes Charlotte, pointedly addressing Theobald, not his wife. "You said nothing about servants in your letter, Francis, but we concluded that you would want them, and have engaged you two respectable country girls as cook and housemaid. I presume that is as many as you will keep?"

"Eh? Well, I'm sure I don't know. I hope the cook *can* cook," answers Mr. Theobald. "By the way, Charlotte, have you ordered dinner? We are all of us ready for it."

"We concluded you would have dined early, Francis. But there are some chops. You can have chops and tea when you like."

Mr. Theobald puts up his glass, and looks from one of his sisters to the other with unaffected surprise. "Chops and tea! Good heaven, what a dreadful combination! Tea alone—or chops alone—but together! Jenny, my dear, why didn't you remind me to dine on the road!"

Jane answers, diplomatically, that, for her part, she would sooner have a cup of tea than anything else, still a chop will be just the thing for Blossy. And then Blossy, hearing her own name mentioned, comes a step or two forward, evidently desirous of notice.

"Kiss your aunts, Bloss," says Mr. Theobald, taking possession of the only easy-chair the room contains. "Go up and give each of those ladies one of your best kisses."

"Yes, Blossy, go," says Jane, pushing her daughter on, a little nervously, towards her relatives.

But Miss Charlotte's eyes happen, unfortunately, to be riveted full upon the child's blooming upturned face; and Blossy stops short.

"Come here, my dear," says the elder sister, amicably, but in the stiff tone of a person unaccustomed to children.

"No, me not," says Blossy, grasping her mother's dress tight with both her small hands.

"Go this moment and kiss those nice ladies," says Jane, sternly.

"No, me not," cries Blossy, driven by desperation to violent language. "Dey not nice. Dey narsy, narsy ladies!"

The Miss Theobalds, it is to be hoped, do not understand these infantine accents.

"She looks rather hectic," remarks the elder sister, scanning the brilliant carnations and snows of Blossy's complexion. "If that child were mine, Francis, I should try her with a little taraxacum."

"She seems to like her own way, and to get it," adds Miss Charlotte. "A hundred to one the ornament wasn't smashed to pieces. If I had anything to do with the child, Francis, I should *make* her obey."

Up rises all Jane's blood at the two speeches. "Blossy has never had a day's sickness since she was born, and never takes physic. Blossy has perfect health." This she addresses to the elder Miss Theobald. "And as to her disobedience," looking full into Charlotte's crabbed face, "why, little children are sincere, and won't go to strangers as they will to their own people; why should they?"

"Oh, of course not. Of course my brother's child looks upon us as strangers!" says Miss Charlotte. "Francis," turning sharply to Theobald, who is smiling under his blonde moustache at the little comedy the ladies are enacting for his amusement, "I trust, as long as you live in this neighbourhood, we shall never have cause for painful discussions on any subject whatever."

"Amen," responds Theobald, promptly. "Let us pray that we all go on in the same friendly spirit as we have begun to-night!"

"But one thing I feel called upon, yes, called upon, to observe." The sisters are now seated; Jane is seated likewise; and Miss Charlotte casts a wicked eye round upon the family circle. "You have lived a great deal abroad, and I am ready to admit that the customs of foreigners may not be our customs; but decency—DECENCY, I suppose, is recognised all over the world, Francis."

"Well, yes; more or less, I suppose it is," Theobald assents, cheerfully.

"Our cousin James is dead."

"So is Queen Anne, my dear Charlotte. If our cousin James were not dead, I and my wife and child would certainly not be at Theobalds."

"He died exactly a month ago."

"On the 28th of May, at three in the afternoon, half an hour after he had eaten a hearty dinner of lamb and gooseberry tart," puts in Miss Theobald, who always feels it her duty in questions of sickness or death to be minute as to details.

"And you, Francis, and those belonging to you, are in colours!" Charlotte Theobald gives a malignant glance at a knot of cherry-coloured ribbon on Blossy's hat. "You come into this neighbourhood—into the very house where he died—in colours!"

Jane crimsons with shame. "It is my fault," she cries. "Yes, Theobald, it is my fault. I forgot all about it. I will make up some mourning at once."

"Not if I know it, Jenny," says Mr. Theobald, becoming suddenly animated. "Not a stitch of black shall you or anyone in this house put on for James Theobald."

"Your own first cousin, Francis," expostulates the elder Miss Theobald.

"My own first cousin, Annie. I became his heir by accident, and I feel exceedingly grateful to him—for his sudden death; but I am not going to wear mourning for him. Jenny, my dear, you have never heard the story of our good fortune? You shall hear it in a dozen words. Once upon a time, long ago, our cousin James made a will, leaving all the worldly goods he possessed to me. Since then, certain actions of mine having displeased him, he made up his mind to cut me off with a shilling, had a new will drawn out to that effect, and died before he had signed it, leaving me, whether he liked it or not, his heir-at-law. Well, I say I am extremely grateful to him on many accounts, but I am not going to wear sackcloth and ashes because he is dead. Black does not become me, Jane, nor you either."

"Become! you can view a duty in such a light as that!" exclaims Charlotte, with fierce contempt. "What do you suppose the neighbourhood—what do you suppose our friends will think when they see you flaunting about in every colour of the rainbow?"

Mr. Theobald is habited in a black morning-coat, the rest of his dress is of soberest neutral tints. "Every colour of the rainbow? Why, Charlotte, you must be getting blind like me. What flaunting colours have I got about me? I who pride myself upon my chaste severity of style!"

"You can turn what I say into ridicule, Francis. I am in no humour for joking." A sniff for every full stop. "For you and your wife to appear in Chalkshire out of mourning is——"

"To set Mrs. Grundy openly and deliberately at defiance, Charlotte," interrupts Theobald, putting up his glass again, and looking across good-humouredly at his younger sister's face. "Precisely. Well, I have set Mrs. Grundy at defiance all my life——"

"You have indeed," says Charlotte, with a glance at Jane.

"I shall probably do so till I die. I am too old to change my ways, and Mrs. Grundy, once set at naught, is not a lady to be easily propitiated. Bloss, young woman, come here, and let me hear some of your wise opinions on things in general."

Blossy rushes across the room, and springs, helter-skelter, into her father's arms, where she commences her usual fusillade of chatter, her back well turned upon the two "narsy" ladies in black. The elder Miss Theobald clears her throat, mentally measures the width of Jane's flounces, then, in the tone of one who has made a discovery, remarks that, "It is light enough, really, to read; yet," *qualifying* the proposition, however, by adding that "June is a month in which one must expect long days." Jane, who has not the faintest notion of sustaining conversation of this kind, answers bluntly, "Why, yes, of course we must," then is silent. Miss Charlotte, her face grey and sharp in the twilight, her smooth snake-shaped head erect, her hands resting, in a somewhat masculine mode peculiar to herself, on either knee, sits evidently collecting her forces for a new assault.

"You won't find many friends in the neighbourhood, I should say, Francis?" she asks, or more correctly speaking, asserts, after a time.

"Eh—friends? Not a soul," answers Theobald, who is choking with suppressed laughter over some whispered family criticism of Blossy's. "At least, I don't know yet whether I shall or not. What sort of regiment have you got at Lidlington now?"

"Really I cannot inform you. We live in extremely quiet style, Annie and I, as befits our income. We do not," her head becoming more and more erect—"we do not entertain the military." Theobald's hardly-suppressed laughter at this point gets the better of him. "Nor was I speaking of mere acquaintance. Regimental people, here to-day and gone tomorrow. But friends—real sterling friends."

"Ah, real sterling friends are very rare birds, my dear Charlotte," says Mr. Theobald, pulling one of Blossy's yellow curls.

"No doubt you have found them so. Anne and I have thirty-six resident families on our visiting list. But you have chosen to spend your life in wandering. 'The rolling stone gathers no moss.'"

"Thank heaven, it does not," says Theobald, wilfully *misapplying* the proverb. "There's that one blessing in being a professional tramp; you never get moss-grown. Jane, my love," and he turns with an expression singularly irritating to Miss Charlotte, towards his wife, "what do you think of Theobalds? I have been hearing Blossy's commentaries. Let me hear yours."

Now Jane, ten short minutes ago, had resolved to strive her uttermost not to play the hypocrite, but by all lawful means to conciliate her husband's sisters. She desired, for Blossy's sake, that they should tolerate her. She hoped that they would, at least, be won by the child's grace and beauty and sweetness into overlooking her demerits. But Miss Charlotte's biting speeches, the chilly condescension of Miss Theobald, have already sufficed to turn every good disposition of this ignorant impulsive creature's heart to gall. Theobald was right on points of social wisdom. When was he not right? Mrs. Grundy, once set at defiance, can never be conciliated more in this life! The Miss Theobalds were just as much her antagonists as was Mrs. Crosbie, as would be every woman in Chalkshire. And she would treat them all alike!

"What I think of Theobalds? Well, my dear, I think it smells damp."

The sisters exchange a petrified glance.

"That shows its antiquity, Jenny," says Theobald. "Badge of blue blood for a house to smell mildewed. How do you like this room? Nice old carved ceiling, isn't it?"

Jane looks up at the dingy arabesque above her head, at the heavy centrepiece, the cupids exercising their dislocated arms and legs in the corners. "I don't think I am any judge of carved ceilings," she remarks, coolly.

"I dare say not," exclaims Miss Charlotte. "Such a ceiling as this is a Work of Art. Such a ceiling as this is never to be met with out of a gentleman's house."

"When all these heavy hangings are cleared away," Jane proceeds, "and when we get modern furniture, and white curtains, and plenty of flowers, and line—yes, line the walls with looking-glass, I think the room may be pretty. It hasn't a bit the look of a room that people could live in now."

Anne Theobald rises to her feet, her soul, being weaker, more horror-stricken even than Charlotte's by such unexampled audacity. "If you will permit me, Francis, I will ring for the carriage. You and Mrs. Theobald will, doubtless, be glad to be alone to talk over your domestic arrangements."

And the icy tone, the formal "Mrs. Theobald," are deadlier thrusts, covert though they may be, than any of Miss Charlotte's open ones. Even Theobald winces for the moment under their effect.

The ladies go upstairs to put on their bonnets, and Jane, grimly invited thereto by Miss Charlotte, accompanies them. Stout heart though she has, she feels a greater coward than she ever felt in her life before as soon as she has quitted the protecting presence of Blossy and Theobald, and finds herself alone with her sisters-in-law. Every blind is down, every window closed throughout the house. At three in winter, at six in summer, it is an article of the Miss Theobalds' faith that outer air shall be excluded from curtains and French polish. The indescribable mustiness of old wood pervades the staircase; a mingled flavour of dry-rot, lavender, and feather beds is in the sleeping-rooms. Jane feels as though she would stifle! They conduct her through two or three smaller chambers to the purple, or best, room of the house. It is of the same dimensions as the drawing-room, and contains a huge four-post bedstead, the like of which Jane never saw in her life before—a four-post bedstead draped with purple damask, and covered with a purple satin counterpane, upon which repose the crape bonnets and mantles of the Miss Theobalds. They are arranged with extraordinary neatness—each sister's bonnet exactly over her own long black mantle—and, to Jane's fancy, look, in this dim light, unpleasantly like the dead and "laid-out" bodies of former Theobalds.

"Our cousin James died here," remarks Miss Charlotte. "I conclude you and my brother will choose it for your own room. The nursery has been got ready for the child at the farther end of the house."

"Blossy always sleeps at my side," says Jane. "This is a very handsome room, certainly; but perhaps one with rather more light and air in it would do better for her."

"I think, Charlotte," says Miss Theobald, suavely, "you will be wise to offer no opinions at all on matters connected with taste. I really *think* so."

And then, each before a separate glass, the sisters silently make ready for their departure. The toilette-tables are precisely alike. The Miss Theobalds' dresses are alike. Everything in the room, even to the purple watch-pockets above the pillows, seems mysteriously duplicated. If two dead cousin Jameses were suddenly to rise up and take possession again, Jane feels there would be nothing startling or out of place in the apparition.

"Now, if you could hurry a little, Anne," Miss Charlotte's voice rings through the gloom. "How in the world can it matter at this time of night whether your bonnet-strings are geometrically even or not? You know what Thomas is if the horse is kept."

Anne Theobald, thus admonished, begins groping about, all in a flurry, for a pin; and Jane, perceiving her need, politely takes one from her own waist-belt and offers it.

"I thank you," says Miss Theobald, opening her dreary eyes wide. "I am in mourning. I want a *black one.*"

Jane shrinks away, conscience-stricken.

Mr. Theobald is waiting at the house-door when they come down, so has the advantage of a few pleasant words alone with his sisters; for after a chill "Good-night" Jane flies off—to Blossy, anywhere, where her relations are not.

"You have the same old trap still, I see, Charlotte?" Cheerfully he speaks, as a man determined neither to give offence nor to take it.

A pause broken only by the clink of Theobald's eyeglass as it falls down against his waistcoat buttons. Thomas, the white-gloved, serious coachman, stands outside, a figure of wood holding open the door of the heavy old-fashioned brougham. Diocletian, the white-stockinged serious cob, stands also, looking straight away, down his own melancholy Roman nose, into futurity.

"Have you given Francis the key, Anne?" Miss Charlotte asks at length, her voice duly subdued by reason of Thomas's presence.

Miss Theobald draws forth a rusty big key from her pocket, and places it, with Bluebeard solemnity, in her brother's hand. "The cellar key, Francis. You are aware that under poor cousin James'—ahem! under the peculiar circumstances of your inheritance, even the wine in the cellar becomes yours."

"I hope there is plenty there," says Mr. Theobald. "About the quality of it I have no doubt."

"Well, no," Miss Theobald assents. "Most things in this house, I believe, are genuine."

"Although they may not suit the modern fast school of ideas!" Miss Charlotte, *loquitur*.

Theobald upon this takes the initiative.

"Jane has excellent taste in everything that may be called decorative art, my dear Charlotte—you were alluding to Jane, were you not?—indeed, she has excellent taste on most points, I think. The drawing-room really does want brightening up and modernising. You'll agree with Jenny, I'm sure, when you see the changes she makes."

"It is a painful thing to us to see change of any kind in Theobalds, a very painful thing." Miss Theobald enunciates this truth after the manner of some men when they give out a text, and follows it up with a sigh. "However, what must be, must be!" she adds, after a minute's uncomfortable silence.

"Yes," says Charlotte, taking up the ball, "what must be, must. And our duty is to make the best of it. Francis," laying her thin hand, with as near an approach to affection as she is capable of, on Theobald's arm, "I wish you to understand one thing. We have been long estranged from you, and the fault, as you know, has not been ours. But now that you have returned to your early home, I wish and mean to do my duty towards you—towards you, and towards those belonging to you, as well."

Theobald groans in the spirit; the recollections of his youth furnishing him with only too many illustrations of what his sister Charlotte understands by that terrible word "duty." "I am quite sure you'll get on with Jenny in time, both of you," he remarks, evasively.

"No," answers Charlotte, "that we shall never do. I will speak for myself. I shall never get on with your wife, or like her, any more than she will like or get on with me, while I live. These things cannot be, Francis. She belongs to another class; she belongs to another world than ours."

"To quite another world!" Mr. Theobald responds, under his breath.

"But she is your wife—she is my sister-in-law. And, since you *have* brought her here to live, I must do my duty in taking her by the hand as best I can."

"You are extremely good, Charlotte. Just be kind and amiable in your own manner to her, and poor Jenny will ask no more. She does not expect, I do not myself expect, to be noticed by any of the people in the neighbourhood."

"You will be content for your wife to live, and for your child to grow up—not visited?"

"I shall be perfectly contented for our neighbours to please themselves. Jane and I will run after none of them, you may be quite sure. If the neighbourhood doesn't like us, or we don't like the neighbourhood, we shall always have one alternative open to us—to leave it."

"But in the meantime—I speak honestly, as a true friend, Francis—in the meantime, let your wife keep herself quiet and retired, and I will do what I can, in the way of getting her called on, among our friends. Of a few people I may say I am sure, and in time——"

"Charlotte!" interrupts Mr. Theobald, and, dark though it is, his glass goes mechanically to his eye, as it always does when he is about to say something emphatic, "let us come to a clear understanding at once in this matter. Have the kindness *not* to canvass, please, among your friends on mine or on Jenny's behalf. I married"—he forgets to whisper, and Charlotte steps forward and shuts the door upon the greedily-listening Thomas—"I married, you know, beneath me, or what the world would call beneath me, but I married to please myself, and it has pleased me, enormously, ever since. I wouldn't exchange my actress-wife for any lady in creation——"

"Good heavens, the servants!" says Miss Theobald, glancing nervously in the direction of the kitchens.

"I wouldn't exchange my Bohemian way of life to be made Archbishop of Canterbury to-morrow. You see in me that very rare thing, a contented man. As to living quiet, keeping dark, as you advise, Charlotte, until we know whether we are approved of or not, I'm afraid it wouldn't suit either Jane or me. We saw as we came through the town that the Lidlington flower-show is advertised for to-morrow, and we mean to go to it, meet the whole county face to face and decide for ourselves how we like their looks. We are people, both of us, who require amusement, and amusement we take, whenever it happens to come within our reach."

There is another ominous silence. "The flower-show! You are going to the Lidlington flower-show! Our cousin James was buried only the beginning of the month," Miss Theobald utters at last, in a hollow voice.

"I have said my say, and I have offered to fulfil my duty," remarks Miss Charlotte. "Perhaps the time may come when you will look back to this night with regret, Francis. *Perhaps* it may. I hope sincerely for your sake it will not. Anne, I think we can say good-night. There is nothing further to detain us."

Mr. Theobald helps them into their carriage, and gives a sigh of relief as Diocletian's camel-like stride bears them slowly away down the avenue. Jane and Blossy come rushing out of the drawing-room to meet him.

"What was all that long parley about?" Jane asks. "Blossy is starving for food, but I was afraid to move till they were gone."

"My sisters were giving me the key of the cellar," Mr. Theobald answers; "likewise the pleasant hope that it is well filled. We will proceed thither at once, also to the kitchen, and see with our own eyes that the chops are properly cooked."

"But first let's open all the windows," cries Jane. "Let's have a little of the sweet, wholesome air of heaven through the house. I am choking—choking, and so is Bloss."

"It's your first taste of respectability, my dear Jane," says Theobald, gravely. "You will get accustomed to the flavour in time, I have no doubt,

CHAPTER XII

APPROPRIATED ANGELS

The summer flower-show is one of the great events of the year to Lidlington and its inhabitants. Every grade of Chalkshire society, gay people and serious, gentle people and simple, go alike to this innocent feast of roses. Only they go in batches, each batch at its appointed hour; and, as far as possible, manage not to jostle each other in their exits and their entrances.

Thus the ultra serious-minded, good or quiet set, of the Miss Theobald stamp, arrive (mostly in old-fashioned broughams) as soon as the doors of the gardens are open, and leave exactly as the first drummer-boy of the regimental band, "lent by kind permission of the Colonel and officers," makes his appearance. Worthy Pharisees these. Pharisees who cry aloud in high places that they are not as other men; they desire to see the flowers — the excellent gifts of nature, that neither spin nor sew—not new bonnets and dresses. And next to them, so close, frequently, as to shake hands at the gate, come the spiritual and social trimmers, Mrs. Crosbie among them; people who want to make the best of both worlds, especially the present one, without committing themselves irretrievably to either. And then in flocks the World. Foolish virgins in summer bonnets and fresh dresses, attended by slim young soldiers from the Lidlington barracks, with mammas full-blown and gorgeous, and papas in white waistcoats and frock-coats. And the band plays, and ices are eaten, and flirtations carried on, and the flowers occasionally glanced at, till five o'clock, at which hour enter the Lidlington milliners' girls and apprentices at sixpence a head, and the military drums and fifes are replaced by a German brass band, and Society vanishes.

"We are a little late, Emma," Mrs. Crosbie remarks, on this 29th of June, when Francis Theobald and his wife are about to make their first appearance in Chalkshire, in the comedy of High Life. "But I'm glad to see the Archdeacon still here. There he is among the cut-flowers—dear old man."

"How d'ye do, Mr. Archdeacon?"—a dexterous side-movement having straightway brought Mrs. Crosbie and Emma among the cut-flowers too. "Dear Mrs. Lumly pretty well, I hope? Like ourselves, you come early, Mr. Archdeacon. Impossible to see the flowers when the crush once begins. Ah, these pelargoniums!"

And Mrs. Crosbie takes out her double eye-glass, and, blind to everything else, studies pelargoniums and roses at the Archdeacon's venerable side until the dear old man's departure allows her to turn her eyes and thoughts to more mundane objects.

Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are nearly as gaily clothed as the flowers themselves to-day. When they were abroad and among foreigners they used to look ill-dressed. At the Lidlington flower-show, where nearly everyone is attired by Miss Fletcher, and judged by the Miss Fletcher standard, they are quite the two best-dressed women present. Whatever the artistic faults of her flounces or ribbons, such perfect, such radiant contentment is on Emma's face as renders her, for once, an absolutely pretty girl. We borrow from the French that phrase of "*beauté du diable*"—beauty of youth. Surely there is the beauty of love, too! Surely the homeliest human face, under the sway of the divine passion, possesses a comeliness of its own, independent of lines and colouring. Emma Marsland's engagement with Rawdon is still not formally given out. Faithful to the last to her own high sense of honour, Mrs. Crosbie has decided that, "until the written consent of the guardian ... Jamaica is gained, it is Mr. Crosbie's wish that dear Emma shall remain free in the eyes of the world." But everyone within a dozen miles round knows quite accurately how matters stand: everyone, as the two young people walk about together this afternoon, will look upon them as affianced lovers. And Miss Marsland's delight at the prospect is overpowering. Her breath, every now and then, comes short as if she were walking uphill. She turns cold—she turns warm, so warm that she gets nervous about the seams of her gloves, and has to cramp her poor little fat hands into a position that, but for love, would be unendurable. When, and oh! when will the laggard Rawdon appear, and the delightful duty of trotting him out before the assembled world of Chalkshire begin?"

Rawdon, during the whole past fortnight, has fulfilled every duty of his new position in life with punctilious care, has done everything (the writing of love letters included) that even his mother's heart could desire. To-day, for the first time, he rebelled, and rebelled openly. He would do any other mortal thing that Emmy asked him to do. He would *not* go to a flower-show at two and remain till five. Let the ladies proceed thither alone, as his mother was determined neither to miss the Archdeacon, the geraniums, nor the regiment, and he would follow—yes, he promised solemnly to follow, and in time to have an hour or more of the band and the promenading, if that would content them and to be their escort home.

Alas, the band plays on and on, until a good half of the programme is exhausted; the last the Archdeacon's (or semi-serious) set vanished long ago, the tide of fashion is at its height; and still Mrs. Crosbie and Emma walk about unattended by Emma's recreant lover!

"Oh, mamma, if he shouldn't come at all!—and when I had looked forward so much to the flower-show, and got this bonnet to please him although I know blue isn't my colour. I don't mind so much for myself, but think how everybody will talk about our being here alone!"

And Emma's heart is swelling and her lips beginning to quiver, when a sudden turn round a marquee brings her abruptly face to face with the woman she has learned to dread the most on earth—Jane Theobald.

"Mamma," she gasps, stopping short. "Do you see the Theobalds? What shall we do?"

"We shall pass quietly on, my dear Emma," answers Mrs. Crosbie, without a change of colour, without a flutter of the Hervey eyelid, "and we shall see nobody. A cut would be in the worst possible taste until we know for certain what everybody else means to do. We shall," attuning her voice into a discreet monotone as the distance lessens, "just walk quietly on——and see——nobody."

And they do so. The hot blood flames over Jane's cheek, but she looks steadily into the faces of both as they pass. Mrs. Crosbie gazes placidly on towards the north pole: Emma's eyes are never raised from the ground. The deed is done. Not even by the coldest, most frigid salutation is Francis Theobald's wife, the Princess Czartoriska of Spa, to be recognised here, on the sacred soil of Chalkshire.

"So that is settled!" says Jane, bravely, yet with a certain passionate tremor in her voice, "I like to know exactly how I stand, and now I do know it."

"Let us hope we can exist without the Crosbie patronage, my dear," says Theobald kindly. "You are the prettiest and the best dressed woman here, Jenny. Let that support you, even under Mrs. Crosbie's neglect."

"Neglect; I call it an insult," says Jane, very low. "You told me I should have sermons preached to me when I came to Chalkshire, and so I have. Fortunately for my poor comprehension, they are sermons easy to understand!"

Before Theobald can answer, a friendly hand is laid on his arm. "How are you, old fellow?" says a friendly familiar voice close behind them. "Mrs. Theobald, too! This *is* a pleasant surprise. Who would have thought of meeting you in such a place as Lidlington."

"Brabazon! Brabazon in the flesh! And what the deuce are you doing in this part of the world?" answers Mr. Theobald, when his eyeglass has enabled him to recognise the newcomer's face.

And then they all shake hands, and Jane's volatile spirit rises twenty degrees on the instant. If she has more foes, she has more supporters in this land of strangers than she knew of.

Captain Brabazon is one of the people the Theobalds speak of as an old friend. Two years ago they spent a summer in his society in Ems, and since that time have twice met accidentally, and had jovial times together in Brussels and Paris. They have never asked, or wanted to ask, who Captain Brabazon is; Captain Brabazon has never asked, or wanted to ask, who they are. Out of England such details, even among Englishmen, are void of interest. A. is a pleasant fellow, or has a pretty wife! B. likes to invite them to dinner, or to go with them to the play; it is sufficient. And yet, the moment A. and B. meet on English territory, they feel it a point of honour to disclose their mutual conditions and reasons of existence! Before another minute is over Mr. Theobald explains that he is a Chalkshire man by birth, and having unexpectedly come into a small property in the neighbourhood, *et cetera*. Captain Brabazon, for the first time, tells the Theobalds to what regiment he belongs, and adds that he is now stationed at Lidlington. Awfully slow quarters; brains exhausted over fruitless devices for destroying time; looks upon it as a special interposition of providence having met Mr. and Mrs. Theobald. Then, naturally, he joins them in their walk.

They come across other officers of the regiment, come across the Colonel himself; Captain Brabazon introduces everybody. The Colonel, a susceptible Irish batchelor of five-and-forty, is smitten by Jane on the spot, and joins them too. Every subaltern from the Lidlington barracks wants straightway to be introduced to Mrs. Theobald. She is the prettiest woman, the best dressed woman, the newest woman in the gardens. As far as one no insignificant section of society goes, Jane may consider herself "launched."

Launched! The mammas and daughters watching her progress askance from beneath their parasols ask themselves blankly, how all this is going to end! It has become a generally received opinion in the neighbourhood of late (I do not say owing to any special or underhand influence), that Mrs. Francis Theobald will not be called upon.

"We should certainly not condemn persons of the artist class, *because* they are artists," Mrs. Crosbie has remarked, more than once, when the subject of Jane's visitability has been broached before her. "But I cannot see—I cannot see that we are called upon to make associates of them." And the seed thus sown has, certainly, fallen upon good ground. It was known, long ago, under what circumstances Francis Theobald wooed and married his wife. It has transpired now, partly through the outspokenness of Mr. Crosbie and Rawdon, partly through the grudging admissions of Emma Marsland, that she is pretty. And all the mammas and daughters in the neighbourhood of Lidlington are, at least, ready to endorse Mrs. Crosbie's sentiments.

They would not condemn, they would be very sorry to condemn a person in Mrs. Theobald's position merely on account of her lowly birth or antecedents; still they cannot see, taking all the circumstances of this particular case together, that they are called upon to associate with Mrs. Theobald herself.

But what if Colonel Mauleverer, what if the whole of the officers of the regiment hold a different opinion? As the Colonel walks along, all devotion, at Jane's side, Theobald and Captain Brabazon following, he takes off his hat to different ladies, married and unmarried, of his acquaintance, and by no faintest shade of coolness in the responsive salutations dare any of them show disapproval of his companion! In a small place like Lidlington, the Colonel, above all the unmarried Colonel, of a regiment is an authority. The situation is grave. Mrs.

Crosbie, watching events from afar, thanks her good genius that she ventured upon no stronger measure than "not seeing" Jane a while since.

"It really seems, Emma, love," she remarks, "it really seems, and very glad I am of it, that this poor Mrs. Theobald is to receive a little notice after all."

"I never doubted that she would," answers Miss Marsland, whose spirit is growing bitter under Rawdon's continued absence; "I never for a moment doubted that Mrs. Theobald would be run after—by gentlemen."

But Mrs. Theobald is destined to "receive notice" from a power higher still than Colonel Mauleverer, a power whose social dictates no one in Chalkshire has ever yet thought of disputing. It comes about thus: and to give due dramatic effect to the scene of Jane's solitary triumph, I should premise, that not only Mrs. Crosbie and Emma, but pretty nearly every other matron and maiden at the flower-show, are ranged around as spectators:

"You must have an ice, Mrs. Theobald," says Colonel Mauleverer, as they pass before the refreshment-tent, the only really cool place in the gardens, and near, but not too near to the band. "I want you to listen to this next set of waltzes. Our bandmaster has written them, but they are not christened yet. Do you think you could help him to a name?"

"Certainly," says Jane, without hesitation. "Call them by the Christian name of the prettiest and most popular woman in the neighbourhood. Nothing can be simpler."

"The prettiest and most popular woman in the neighbourhood! Well," says the Colonel, gallantly, "as Mrs. Theobald only arrived yesterday, I suppose one would have to fix upon Lady Rose Golightly."

"And they must be the 'Lady Rose Waltzes,' of course," interrupts Jane. "That is to say, if 'Lady Rose' is not too much of a fine lady to allow it?"

"Lady Rose? Oh, she is less of a fine lady than anyone in Chalkshire. Lady Rose is a charming little woman. I'm sure you and she would get on capitally."

"But Lady Rose!" says Jane, with due emphasis on the "Lady." "I know nothing about the aristocracy, or about aristocratic titles myself, but mustn't her father have been an earl or duke, or some tip-top swell of the kind?"

Colonel Mauleverer wonders for one moment who this pretty ignorant woman at his side *was!* Well, never mind, she *is* a pretty woman, and a delightfully unaffected one, too. Fancy, here, in Chalkshire, meeting any human being who could unblushingly own to knowing nothing of the aristocracy!

"Lady Rose Golightly is a daughter of the Duke of Malta. She is not a dozen yards away from us—the little lady in white and green, and with a great plate of strawberries in her hand—we shall be close to her directly. A daughter of the late, a sister of the present, Duke of Malta. When she came out more than ten years ago—Lady Rose is now nine-and-twenty—she had offers from half the noble houses in Europe, and said 'no' to all of them. Was she ambitious? Was she in love? No one but Lady Rose knew. She remained unmarried till she was three or four-and-twenty, then, one fine morning, married poor young Golightly of the Blues, and separated from him in six months. In ten words, there is Lady Rose's history."

"Is she thought pretty?"

"Oh, tastes differ," says the old Colonel, too well informed to praise one woman to another. "She is before you, Mrs. Theobald. What is your opinion?"

"I don't think one woman can ever judge of another. It is what I should call a washed-out face. Hair, complexion, eyes, all the same colour."

"The Beaudeserts are all like that. Some people admire the style. To me bright colouring is the first beauty a woman can possess."

"And why doesn't she live with her husband—Lady Rose, I mean?"

"Ah, that is the question—why? Golightly friends say one thing; Lady Rose's anoth For my part," adds the Colonel, "I can never believe in any of these sad stories that the fault is on the lady's side."

"And I," says Jane, "believe that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is. But, perhaps, Colonel Mauleverer, you speak as a bachelor?"

"Alas, Mrs. Theobald, I do! Mine is an untoward fate. I roam in search of domestic blessedness round the world, and whenever I meet a woman I could like well enough to live and die with, I am certain to discover that she makes some other fellow's happiness already."

"How touching! You are quite positive, I suppose, that all these appropriated angels would charm you equally, if they were free?"

This interesting conversation has brought them close beside the chief refreshment stall; and Jane is enabled to inspect, at first hand, the charming little woman with whom, according to Colonel Mauleverer, she would be sure to get on so capitally.

Lady Rose Golightly is decidedly not a pretty woman, and yet she is more than a pretty woman. She has the gift of fascination. Wherein does this fascination lie? You will find no two people give you the same answer to that question. A small hand and foot; a short upper lip; quantities of flaxen Bond Street hair; these exhaust the catalogue of charms Lady Rose's greatest admirers are able to make out for her. And against these, what defects! A complexion marred by a dozen London seasons, whose ravages no art can hide; over-prominent grey eyes, from which neither stimulants nor belladonna can dispel the weariness; a figure——; but no, I stop. Lady Rose is fascinating. No one in the world, or at least in Chalkshire, denies that—("though, if she were not a duke's daughter, my dear madam, we should see how much of the fascination is *genuine!*") At thi

present moment, pretty girls, nice girls, girls in their first fresh bloom, left neglected, Lady Rose, in her draggled green and white muslin—she wears out her old dresses down in the country—and with the sun lighting up every imperfection of her faded face, is surrounded.

She accords to Jane a single cold look out of half-closed eyelids, nods, and gives a pleasant "how d'ye do," to Colonel Mauleverer. Then, suddenly, she sees Captain Brabazon and Mr. Theobald; and in a second a curiously vivid flush of colour has risen over Lady Golightly's cheeks.

"Will you come and have a turn with me, Captain Brabazon?"—little Brabazon having manfully passed through the competitive crowd and reached her side. "Oh, yes, I've done my strawberries—till I begin another plate. Meantime, I want to ask you something."

She puts up her parasol, and goes forth abruptly into the blazing sunshine, Captain Brabazon, envied by everybody, accompanying her.

"Who are these new people that you and Colonel Mauleverer are walking about with?"

"They are remarkably nice people," answers Brabazon, not feeling very sure what ground he stands on. "I knew them first at Ems, afterwards in Paris. They are as nice people as I ever met in my life, and——"

"Oh, I am sure of all that. Their name is?"

"Theobald. He tells me he has just come into a little property in this neighbourhood. The place itself is called 'Theobalds.' Inherits it from a cousin who meant to cut him off, but hadn't time. Apoplexy. Codicil not signed. Old will torn up. Heir-at-law. Quite a romantic [illegible]

"And the——" Lady Rose looks straight away before her as she asks this, "the young lady in the extremely brilliant silk is—Mrs. Theobald?"

"Mrs. Theobald is the lady who was walking with Colonel Mauleverer."

"Who was she, do you know?"

Captain Brabazon believes, from internal evidence only, that Mrs. Theobald was something connected with the stage. "May be wrong, but believes it was something of the kind, still——"

"You are right, I'm sure," interrupts Lady Rose Golightly. "She has the indescribable look all those people have; and, indeed, I remember hearing at the time that Mr. Theobald had made some unfortunate marriage. I knew Francis Theobald very well, in town, a good many years ago." She volunteers the statement in answer to Captain Brabazon's look of inquiry. "And, of course, I recognised him just now. But I thought it wise to make a few domestic inquiries before renewing the acquaintance. So they have come to live in this neighbourhood, have they? A pleasant acquisition to the Chalkshire society."

"Very," says Captain Brabazon, sententiously. Five minutes' conversation with Theobald have sufficed to make him doubtful as to whether Chalkshire society and his friends, the Theobalds, will get on or not.

"I think I may as well ask Mr. Theobald to join our party to-morrow. Anything in the shape of a new face is pleasant in Chalkshire. One could ask him to dinner without his wife, surely?"

"One might *ask* him," returns Captain Brabazon, with emphasis. He has an immense admiration for Jane, would do and say much to have the chance of taking her in to dinner.

"But you don't think he would accept. Do you mean that?"

"Well, Theobald is a queer compound. The veriest Bohemian that ever lived, in many things, and yet punctilious, punctilious to a fault, on some points. You must allow, Lady Rose, it would look rather like a slight to his wife to leave her out in a first invitation."

"A first invitation!" For an instant the corners of Lady Rose's lips quiver. "I thought I told you I knew Francis Theobald well in old days? However, in one sense you are right. This is my first invitation to him as a married man, and I suppose it will be as well to ask her, too. Only mind," she adds this after a minute's pause, "mind one thing, Captain Brabazon, I shall look to you to take Mrs. Theobald completely off my hands, if I do ask her. You fully understand that?"

Captain Brabazon accepts the charge with rather suspicious readiness, and Lady Rose retraces her steps towards the refreshment tent. The Theobalds are still there; Jane eating ice, and surrounded by a ring of the same courtiers who, five minutes before, were fighting to hold Lady Rose's parasol or hand her a teaspoon; Theobald in a corner, discussing with the Colonel over the propriety of getting up a little loo, as an enlivenment to the dulness of the barracks at Lidlington.

He is the handsomest man present, the only man worth looking at in all this dreary provincial crowd, Lady Rose thinks, promptly. Her heart gives a thump—as loudly as can be expected of a heart that has thumped so many years, and for so many different objects. She remembers her of a time, long distant, when a certain little romance was being enacted in her life, with a certain person for hero. Could those love-lit days but come again! Nay, could but a single gleam of the old divine refractions light up the prose of her disillusioned, fast-waning youth! Lady Rose walks straight up to Theobald, the crowd dividing for her on either side, but when she reaches him stands dumb. Lady Rose Golightly dumb, shy, and with a blush like a girl's upon her sallow cheek!

"I never, myself, care for more than five," says Theobald's voice. It seems to come to her from the other side the grave. "Unless, of course, you have Irish loo, then——"

The importance of the subject brings Mr. Theobald's glass into his eye, and by chance Lady Rose Golightly comes within its focus. She says, "How d'ye do, Mr. Theobald?" in

a voice admirably divested of all emotion; she gives him her hand; they make one or two commonplace remarks, like people who parted from each other yesterday. Then each stands silent, looking into the other's face, and Colonel Mauleverer opportunely begins asking Lady Rose's opinion about the waltzes that have just been played, and the name that has been proposed for them.

Lady Rose, who has not listened to a bar, pronounces the waltzes a complete success. If they may be called by her name? Why, it would be only too great a flattery to her. She will tell Herr Bergmann so, herself; and over Lady Rose Golightly trips to the German band-master, who takes his hat off to the ground, and blushes all over his bald Teutonic forehead with delight at this public tribute paid to his genius by the great lady of the neighbourhood. Then she comes back to Theobald, and the Colonel, divining, perhaps, that he is not wanted just at present, disappears.

"You find me very much changed, Mr. Theobald? Should you have known me, I wonder, if I had not spoken first?"

"I should have known you anywhere, and under any circumstances. I see no change in you, Lady Rose."

Except that she has grown yellow and thin, and older by half a century. When will men learn to speak the truth to women, and how much will women value the truth when they do speak it?

"It seems odd that you and I should meet like this! What became of you," she turns her eyes away from his, "after the Camerons' ball? That must be six, seven—yes, indeed it is, seven years ago this month. It was on the 30th of June; I never saw you, to speak to, since."

"Lady Cameron's was the last London party to which I ever went," Theobald answers, quietly. "From that day on I dropped, as completely as though I had never had a place there, from the world and everything belonging to it."

"From one section of the world, you mean. You have managed to exist in a different one, it seems."

"Yes, I have managed to exist. So have you, Lady Rose."

There is, or Lady Rose imagines there to be, a shade of reproach in Theobald's voice. And all her woman's heart returns to him more and more. Alas, if Lady Rose but knew how happy a man Theobald's actress-wife has made him!

"We spend our lives, most of us, it seems to me, Mr. Theobald, in making mistakes and repenting of them afterwards."

"In repenting—sometimes in repairing them, may we not?" he asks.

"Oh, there are mistakes that never can be repaired," says Lady Rose Golightly, in a tone of subdued pathos she always employs when she has occasion to speak of her own marriage. "But what am I thinking of all this time," she goes on, "not to ask about your wife? Mrs. Theobald is here, I know; Captain Brabazon pointed her out to me, and I think her *charming!* Will you introduce us, please?"

And so it comes to pass that Mrs. Theobald, the unvisited, the adventuress, is brought up by her husband, the whole society of Lidlington looking on, and introduced to Lady Rose Golightly.

The whole society of Lidlington has more to see yet. Lady Rose is not a woman of half measures. For good or for evil, whatever she undertakes she carries out thoroughly. She has renewed her friendship with Francis Theobald; has discovered, at the end of three minutes, that her feeling for him is—pretty much what it always was; and for his sake resolves to behave well (Lady Rose's doctrines on this point of "behaving well" are somewhat broad) to his wife.

"Shall we take a turn round the gardens, Mrs. Theobald?" she asks Jane, presently. "I don't know whether you have noticed the azaleas? They really are beautiful. There is one plant from my own garden that I am conceited about, if you will let me show it to you."

And then, full in the face of everybody, Mrs. Crosbie, Miss Marsland included, "the young person in the extremely brilliant silk," and Lady Rose in her dirty, green-and-white muslin, walk forth into the sunshine together, friends.

Lady Rose is all sweetness and condescension; Mrs. Theobald is shy, and does not warm readily into talk. She is perfectly ignorant of great ladies and of their attributes, and is not sure whether she ought to say "my lady" sometimes or not; and, besides, it is such a very new sensation to Jane, this of being patronised! Lady Rose thinks her a fool; one of those brainless dolls men marry for the sake of their pink cheeks and blue eyes, and pities Theobald more and more.

"This is the azalea I spoke of. But perhaps you don't care for such things? I am foolish about flowers. I am obliged to create interests to fill up my life. You have children, I think?"

"I have one child," answers Jane; "a little daughter of three."

"Ah! that must be a great resource, I am sure. Don't you find it so?"

Jane is silent. She has never looked upon Blossy in the light of "its" being a resource against ennui.

"Sometimes I have thought a child would have made me happier, but really one cannot tell. I fancy there must be a great deal of anxiety with children when they are ill, and anxiety kills me. I have such wretched nerves. Still, one wants something to interest one, and nothing does interest one, Mrs. Theobald, does it?"

Jane answers rather stupidly, "She is sure she doesn't know," and Lady Rose goes on:

"What one wants of course is constant excitement—if excitement would only last! I was a little amused at Hurlingham last season,

just while it was new. Then I got sick of it. Everyone shoots so well, and the pigeons die so monotonously. You like a pigeon match?"

"I wouldn't be at such a cruel thing, if I was shot for it myself!" cries Jane, with warmth.

"Ah!——tender-hearted. I have heard some people are like that. I don't know at first that I quite liked seeing the poor little wretches tumble over, but I got used to it. I get used so soon to everything, good and bad alike. Even the opera doesn't please me as it once did. You are fond of music? You play and sing? No? Then you draw, perhaps?"

"I do nothing," answers Jane; "I haven't an accomplishment belonging to me, except the one I learnt in my profession when I was a girl —dancing!"

"And that, I am sure, you do to perfection. I only wish I did any one thing well, instead of everything badly. But I have never had time for real application. Now would you like to see the calceolarias?"

Not a solitary idea have they in common, these two young women, who are destined to be placed in such curious juxtaposition or rivalry. By the time they have got through the calceolarias they are reduced to monosyllables; by the time they find themselves, with relief, at the refreshment tent again, are silent.

"Thank heaven *that* duty is over!" thinks Lady Rose, as Theobald and Captain Brabazon come forward to meet them. "I need never say as much to her again while I live. Now for the reward."

And, conscious of her own rectitude in having behaved well to Theobald's wife, away Lady Rose Golightly walks, with Theobald himself, to the shadiest, most sequestered portions of the Lidlington nursery-gardens, and is seen no more.

CHAPTER XIII

LADY ROSE GOLIGHTLY

Just at this juncture Rawdon Crosbie makes his appearance on the scene.

He joins Emma at once; meekly receives his scolding for being late; then, with the best grace he can, resigns himself to the prospect of being exhibited, as an engaged man, before all Emma's little Lidlington world for the remainder of the afternoon.

"You look very nice indeed, my dear Emmy, now that you are not lecturing;" this he remarks after they have made the round of the gardens, and have been seen and smiled at by everybody. "I never knew you wear a prettier bonnet or dress."

Ever since he met Mrs. Theobald in Spa, Rawdon has been going into raptures about the becomingness of pale blue and pink roses. So, to please her lover, Emma has caused this combination to be worked into form by Miss Fletcher, not in common cheap materials, like Jane's, but in richest silk, laces, and furbelows, and with the result he sees.

"I am glad you like me, Rawdon. Mamma thought so much blue might make me look loud. *Apropos* of that—well no, *apropos* of nothing—but who do you think is here and not in mourning? Mrs. Pippin says she thinks it hardly decent—your Spa friend Mrs. Theobald!"

The tell-tale blood dyes Rawdon's brown face up to the temples; otherwise he keeps himself in hand well. "Mrs. Theobald? What! without her husband, or with him?"

"Oh, they are both here, and it seems have plenty of friends already. Lady Rose is quite intimate with them; and as to the officers——"

There is no need for Emma to finish the sentence. Exactly before them, at a distance of about a dozen yards, stands Jane, still close beside the band, and still with a ring of admirers around her. Colonel Mauleverer, little Captain Brabazon, a fluttering train of subalterns, all eager for her smiles! She is looking her best in the delicate mauve dress (how well Rawdon remembers her showing it to De Lausac!) which Lady Rose called "that extremely brilliant silk," and with so much attention, and so large an audience. A woman who has been once an actress at heart retains her actress instincts to the last, as surely as a woman of fashion retains hers. With Lady Rose Golightly, alone, she was ill at ease, awkward as a schoolgirl. With half-a-dozen men contending for her favour, and half-a-hundred eyes looking on, Jane breathes her own atmosphere, laughs her own laugh, talks her own language, is herself again.

Rawdon Crosbie stops short, and watches her smiling unconscious face with feelings of most unwarrantable bitterness. How utterly the Spa ball, and the walk home in the moonlight, how utterly all the sweetness, the romance of their brief acquaintance must have died from this light-minded, fickle young woman's memory, whilst he——

"Come away, Emma!" the tone of his voice actually makes Miss Marsland jump. "There's nothing in worse taste than for ladies to flock round a regimental band as they do here. I detest it. If women only knew," assuming the true marital tone already, "what men say of them afterwards!"

He marches Emma off to one of the least frequented walks in the gardens—where they come across Theobald and Lady Rose—makes her affectionate and bitter speeches by turns, rails against women, against men, against flower-shows, and military bands, and the fools and coquettes who listen to them. At last, abruptly, in connection with nothing that has gone before, inquires if his mother and Mrs. Theobald have met and recognised each other?

"We—we did meet Mr. and Mrs. Theobald,"

answers Emma, evasively. "But that was before we saw anyone speak to them, and mamma thought it as wise to take no decisive step towards renewing the acquaintance; you understand, Rawdon?"

"I understand nothing, unless I am told it plainly," answers Rawdon. "You met Mrs. Theobald before you knew Lady Rose Golightly was going to notice her and cut her. Is that it?"

"I hope I know too well what is due to myself to cut anyone. There were other people passing at the time, and neither mamma nor I looked in the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Theobald. Simply that."

"Did she see you?"

"How can I tell you, since I was not looking in their direction."

After this the lovers walk back, without the interchange of many more sentiments, towards the point from whence they started. Mrs. Crosbie forms one of the knot of dowagers who are obstructing the entrance of the refreshment-tent, at this hour the most popular tent in the garden. And here Rawdon disburthens himself of his betrothed, then rushes off, forgetting all his anger of five minutes ago, to search for Jane—to find out whether that light-minded, fickle young woman means to be offended with him or not!

He has not far to seek. Mrs. Theobald is eating a strawberry ice just outside the tent, with Captain Brabazon holding her parasol, and evidently making all the running he can during the absence of the Colonel. She looks round, she sees Rawdon Crosbie intently watching her, and a smile and flush of recognition light up her face. Two seconds more and he is at her side.

"You see we have kept our word—we have really taken possession of our Chalkshire estates," Jane remarks, as they shake hands. "I was afraid you were not here when I saw your mamma and Miss Marsland alone."

She is not offended then. Yet something in her demure voice as she says these two ominous words, "your mamma," something in the mocking expression of her blue eyes, makes Rawdon Crosbie hot and cold by turns. How can he tell what highly dramatised version of the horrible Czartoriska mistake will not be detailed in another minute for Captain Brabazon's benefit? He makes an absurdly stiff little speech welcoming her to Chalkshire; asks for Mr. Theobald, for Blossy.

'Theobald is here, or was here five minutes ago; Blossy is at home at Theobalds. I feel an inch taller, Mr. Crosbie, I can tell you, when I speak of Theobalds as home! Think what it is for us, vagrants, to possess twenty-two mildewed rooms, and a whole legion of domestic rats, of our own!"

"Theobalds is a charming old country-house, I am told," says Captain Brabazon. "I hope you will let me ride over to see you as soon as you are settled, Mrs. Theobald?"

"Come and see us at once," Jane answers, with her off-hand heartiness. "We are as much settled as we are ever likely to be in this life. The Colonel has promised to breakfast with us on Sunday, you had better come with him. Mr. Crosbie, *you* can find your way to Theobalds without being asked, I hope?" turning to young Rawdon with an air of familiar friendliness that is not lost upon more than one of the bystanders.

For Rawdon, himself, he does not know how to take her. Nothing can be more pointedly amicable than the manner of her reception of him, and still, in her voice, in her eyes, there lurks that same demure, half-mocking expression which troubled him from the first. How if all these friendly words, these lavishly sweet smiles accorded to himself, should cloak some scheme of retaliation upon his mother and Emmy, of which he is to be the unhappy instrument! Jane seems to guess his thoughts.

"Would you mind taking me for a walk round the gardens?" she asks him in a little pleading voice. "I want you to tell me who everybody is, and I want to hear all that you have been doing since I saw you. Good-bye for the present, Captain Brabazon. We shall expect you on Sunday, mind. Oh, my parasol, please!" And then away she walks, Rawdon Crosbie, with feelings of oddly mixed embarrassment and triumph, at her side.

"Ah, let us wait here a little," cries Jane, as the band just at this minute begins to play the overture to "Robert le Diable." "Hackneyed and hurdy-gurdied though it is, I am never tired of that poor old opera. It reminds me of so many jolly days."

And she stops precisely opposite Emma Marsland, Mrs. Crosbie, and half a dozen of their more intimate friends, and with the most innocent face imaginable, and keeping time with the fingers of one slim hand upon the palm of the other—as if the music were the only thing in the universe of which she were conscious—listens.

Rawdon listens too; does not, that is to say, hear a solitary note that is played, but is sensible of a murmur of subdued feminine talk in which his own name frequently occurs, and feels, although he never once looks in their direction, that the eyes of Emma, of his mother, and of his mother's friends, are all riveted upon his hot face. For four or five mortal minutes Jane keeps him at his post (strange how callous the kindest-hearted women are about inflicting this sort of torture on men they really like); then, after a whisper that sends the hot iron deeper and deeper into Emma's spirit, she moves away, followed, of course, by Rawdon, among the crowd.

"The overture was worth stopping for, Mr. Crosbie, was it not? I could tell by your face how you enjoyed it."

"What have I done to make you so cruel, Mrs. Theobald? I went to say good-bye to you in Spa, and you had gone to breakfast in the

woods—with De Lansac! I meet you again in Chalkshire, and the only way you can amuse yourself, as soon as you can find time to spare me a word at all, is by laughing at me."

"But laughing at people is my way of showing how well I like them," responds Jane. "Surely you don't want to be treated with ceremony, do you?"

"Laugh at me till I die," says young Rawdon quickly. "I shall never want any other treatment at your hands."

"Heavens! are you going to be sentimental? Give me notice if you mean to do anything so dreadful!"

"I do not, indeed. I leave sentimental speeches to the De Lansacs and Colonel Mauleverers of the world—the kind of men you prefer, Mrs. Theobald."

"Ah, you've been watching me, have you? Now, I won't allow that, Master Rawdon. Children of your age should know better than to spy the actions of their elders."

How well they suit each other, this unequally stationed boy and girl, whom Fate, with her accustomed indifference as to results, persists in throwing together! They stroll about among the flower-stalls in the level sunlight; they quarrel, make up, jest, laugh, are happy. It might be Arcadia to Rawdon Crosbie, instead of the Lidlington nursery-grounds. Jane tells him about their arrival at Theobalds yesterday; describes their visit in the dark to the cellar, and how Theobald, mistrustful of the "respectable country girls" hired by Miss Charlotte, would cook his own mutton chops; and how, all through the night, she kept fearing that the rats meant to carry away Blossy bodily.

"The only excitement I can look forward to in life is rat-catching. If you have any terriers bring them over some fine morning, please. Oh, and I am going to make a garden! I don't know a parsnip from a ranunculus, but I am going to make a garden, and a croquet-ground, somewhere as far as possible from the house. Will you come and help me? By-the-by, Mr. Crosbie," she runs on, "you are always on leave? I don't know much about military matters, but I thought people in the army were generally stationed somewhere."

Rawdon explains that he is, for the present, serving his country at Woolwich, but has just managed to get another week's leave of absence—he does not add, a week predestined to driving Emmy about in his mother's pony-carriage, and paying morning calls of a certain prophetic and mournful character to Emmy's friends.

"Well, that will do capitally, then," cries Jane. "I suppose one can make a garden in a week? But mind, I shall want you for the real hard work, the digging and turf-cutting, and all that."

"I'll work eight hours a day, with spade and pickaxe, as long as Mauleverer and Brabazon are not my fellow-labourers," answers Rawdon, trying rather unsuccessfully to conceal the ridiculous satisfaction which the proposal causes him.

They walk completely round the garden, naturally meeting the whole of Mrs. Crosbie's acquaintance as they walk, and just as they are returning into the neighbourhood of the band are overtaken by Theobald and Lady Rose Golightly. It is now five o'clock, and Lady Rose is on her way to her carriage. She has grown younger by a dozen years during the last half-hour; her eyes sparkle, a bloom that, for once, owes nothing to art, is on her face. She is sweeter, more generously condescending than ever in her demeanour towards Francis Theobald's wife.

"I have been asking your husband if you will dine with me to-morrow, Mrs. Theobald, and he refers me to you. Oh, indeed, you must come, I want so much to show you The Folly, the ugliest house in England, I call it, and we shall be quite a small, friendly party. Mr. Crosbie," she has already shaken hands with Rawdon, "I suppose one mustn't give you any bachelor invitations now?"

"Why not?" says Rawdon, looking innocent in an exactly inverse ratio to how he feels. Bachelor invitations, bachelor parties, are the very things of all others concerning which, at the present time, Miss Marsland holds the strongest opinions.

"Ah, why! Your own conscience may answer that. Luckily," goes on Lady Rose, with a laugh, "I have nothing to do with other people's consciences. I find my own quite as much as I can manage. And so, as you know no just cause or impediment, I do ask you if you will dine with me at eight o'clock to-morrow? Bachelor party, mind!"

Rawdon accepts, unconditionally; like Captain Brabazon, he at once decides that Mrs. Theobald will fall to his lot at dinner; and as they all walk slowly towards the gates, Lady Rose takes her tablets from her pocket, and writes down the names of her newly-invited guests.

"We shall be a very nice little party, I think, Mr. and Mrs. Theobald, Colonel Mauleverer, Captain Brabazon, Mr. Rawdon Crosbie, Loo Childers—Loo is coming to stay with me to-morrow—and myself. Two, four, seven, an uneven number; but no matter. 'Saturday, 30th of June, Mrs. and Miss——;' why, good heavens! what have I done?" Lady Rose has turned back to another page of her tablets, and looks up with eyes full of genuine horror. "'Saturday, 30th of June'—yes, that is to-morrow—'Mrs. and Miss Coventry Brown, eight o'clock!'"

"You have asked Mrs. Coventry Brown to a bachelor party?" exclaims Rawdon. "Oh, Lady Rose, this is fatal!"

"But what can I do? I utterly forget her existence when I invited everyone else. I can't put her off now."

"A sudden death in the family?"

"And be cross-questioned next morning by the united Brown and Pippin families as to

details. 'When did he die?' 'Why did he die?' 'What depth of mourning do his relations mean to wear?' No, no; I candidly confess I'm much too great a coward to run any risk of that kind. Mrs. Coventry Brown is the Mrs. Candour of this neighbourhood," Lady Rose explains, turning to Jane: "A dragoness of virtue and scandal, under whose rule we all of us live in fear and trembling. Mrs. Coventry Brown at a convivial little bachelor dinner, when I ought to have asked the Archdeacon and five of the minor clergy at least to meet her!"

"Leave us out till another day," suggests Theobald's lazy voice. "We won't be offended. Anything better than putting us at the same table with virtuous people!"

"Well, I'm sure, Theobald!" cries Jane, the indignation flaming hot over all her honest face.

"My dear Mrs. Theobald, I was only jesting," interrupts Lady Rose, with ready tact. "Mrs. Coventry Brown is a somewhat heavy old lady, whom I have contrived, with my usual wisdom, to introduce into an otherwise charming little party. Nothing remains for us all but to bear the infliction as best we can, and pray that she may, at least, leave early. Now, are you going home?"

Jane answers that they are going home as they came, on foot. It is a walk of about two miles across the fields from the Lidlington flower-show to Theobalds.

"But why not let me drive you?" says Lady Rose, still addressing Jane, not Theobald. "Take me out of my way? Not a bit. I pass your gates."

Jane, upon this, reluctant she knows not why, says "Yes," and bids good-bye to Rawdon Crosbie.

"Till to-morrow," adds Lady Rose, nodding to him gaily, as she seats herself beside Mrs. Theobald in the carriage. "And mind, I shall put you on duty, Mr. Crosbie! I shall make you take—you know whom, to dinner."

And then away dashes Lady Rose Golightly's barouche, with its high-stepping greys and fine London footmen, and with Mr. and Mrs. Francis Theobald inside.

"Birds of a feather," remarks Mrs. Coventry Brown in a whisper to Mrs. Crosbie, as these two ladies watch the scene, breathless, from afar. "Birds of a feather! Ah, my dear friend, we all know what Lady Rose is, at heart."

But Rawdon's mother is silent. Dimly it dawns upon her that the vexed question of whether Jane shall or shall not be noticed will have to be reviewed from a higher standpoint than she has hitherto taken.

"Ought we to visit her? It is a matter purely of right or wrong." These were Mrs. Crosbie's sentiments a fortnight ago in Spa. "Will it be good taste not to visit ANYONE with whom Lady Rose Golightly may choose to associate?" is the question now.

CHAPTER XIV

DOMESTIC AND RETROSPECTIVE

"THEOBALD," says Jane, abruptly, "I should like to be told the meaning, you hear me, the meaning of Lady Rose Golightly's civility. Taken a fancy to me? Yes, that's such a very likely thing to happen. She and you were friends, rather, in old days? I don't believe it was rather: I believe you and Lady Rose were once a great deal more to each other than I know anything about, and I think it would be fairer—yes, fairer and juster to me, Theobald—that you should say so at once, and in a straightforward way."

Mr. and Mrs. Theobald are jogging along in a hired fly through the up and down Chalkshire lanes to Lady Rose's dinner party. Jane exceedingly upright, mindful of the flowers in her hair, and of her fresh muslin dress; Mr. Theobald, lavender-gloved, and white-tied, leaning back, with his legs upon the opposite seat, in as comfortable a position as his wife's aggressive frame of temper and the jolting of the fly will permit.

"Yes," goes on Jane, as her husband remains silent, "I am sure of it! And what is more, I shall show Lady Rose Golightly that I *am* sure of it, unless you take the trouble to contradict me."

"And suppose I can't contradict you, Jenny?" remarks Theobald, with perfect good humour. "Suppose Lady Rose and I were more to each other once than you know anything about, what next?"

"Oh! if you tell me that, I have done," says Jane, colouring. "I have nothing to do with any part of your life before your life belonged to me. It is extremely flattering, of course, if I had only the sense to appreciate it, that I should have been the rival or the successor of the Duke of Malta's daughter."

"The rival! Jenny, child, would you like to hear exactly how much Lady Rose and I eve had to say to each other? I can tell you in three words." It is a maxim of Francis Theobald's that nothing baffles curiosity, eludes pursuit, and generally mystifies the human intelligence like truth. And so, by sheer force of habit, and without deliberate intention either of baffling, eluding, or mystifying Jane, he tells the truth now: or as near the truth as a one-sided version of a "history" enacted by two persons can ever be expected to arrive.

"We were both rather young"—I don't know how it happens, but Jane's hand is in Theobald's during the whole of the narration—"both rather young, and one, I can answer for it, extraordinarily foolish. In those days, Jenny, I was, as you know, an officer in her Majesty's household troops, and wore moss rosebuds in my button hole, and spent my nights at balls, and my afternoons in the park and at kettledrum teas. Oh! you may look incredulous, but 'tis true. Kettledrumming was just coming into fashion

when I was a youngster, and whatever was the fashion, the young fool Francis Theobald did——"

"Even to falling in love with Lady Rose Golightly?" interrupts Jane.

"She was not Lady Rose Golightly then, and I don't know that I ever fell in love with her. Mind, I only say I don't know—perhaps I did. I imagined so at the time, and that comes very nearly to the same thing, doesn't it? You see, she was one of the prettiest women in London——"

"No one would think so now."

"And the most run after. A duke's daughter, too! and I dare say I was snob enough—didn't Carlyle, or some one" (Mr. Theobald is not reader of books) "remark once that we are all snobs at heart?—to be influenced by that. Well, I used to meet her everywhere through the whole of one season, and she would always give me her best dances, and throw over earls and marquises by the dozen for me—fact, Jenny, I assure you—and then at last, one fine night, just about seven years ago it must have been, my eyes were opened, and I found out—no very startling discovery you will say—that I had been a donkey! Lady Rose Beaudesert was engaged to the hereditary Prince of Hollenzoffenstein. The wedding was to take place in the third week of July, and the bridesmaids were to wear mauve silk dresses with white tunics, and dear little mauve wreaths and veils——"

"Your voice shakes as you talk that nonsense, Theobald."

"The springs of this vehicle would make anything shake, Jenny."

"Lady Rose had jilted you. I hate her—no, I don't. I love her for behaving so badly that *you* must hate her. Tell me that you hate that woman, Theobald?"

"No, Jane, I can't tell you that. Till I saw her yesterday I had clean forgotten that there was such a person as Lady Rose in existence."

"And at the time?"

"At the time . . . . as you really seem determined to have the story in full . . . . at the time I went one fine evening to a ball at the Camerons, the Lucius Camerons you know—no, you don't know, but that's nothing to do with the story—I went to a ball at the Camerons, and was told by all my best friends, before I got half way up the staircase, that Lady Rose Beaudesert was engaged, and I had better go and offer my congratulations. You see, people knew we had been a good deal together—I had ridden with her and her brother only that morning in the park—and were naturally amused at the situation. Nothing more ridiculous than the position of a jilted man, unless, perhaps, it's the position of the man for whom he has been jilted. But I think, as far as I can recollect, that I got through it pretty well. Lady Rose was standing at the further end of the ballroom, and I went up to her at once, and said a few things, as nicely as I could, about my hopes for her happiness. Her mother, the good old dowager duchess—peace be to her ashes for the part she played towards me!—was on one side, the hereditary prince with the number of syllables in his name on the other. I was introduced to him, and he bowed, extremely graciously, and smiled. I bowed and smiled, extremely graciously, to him. And then I had one last waltz with Lady Rose. I never spoke to her again from that night till yesterday. The story is told."

"And having failed to marry so high you married so low!" says Jane, half moving away her hand. "Having lost the Duke of Malta's daughter, you took . . . a ballet girl!"

If there be truth in the taunt, no shadow of change on Mr. Theobald's good-looking face betrays that it has struck home.

"There was never any question of my marrying the Duke of Malta's daughter, Jenny. I never thought of marrying anyone until you put marriage into my head. We amused each other, and danced with each other, for a whole London season. Then Lady Rose got engaged to her Prince (by the way, she didn't marry him, I wonder how that was?) and I took to another way of life altogether."

"The life you were leading, I suppose, when you came across me?"

"Exactly. Jenny, how all this talk brings back the old days! How plainly I remember you—I'll get made justice of the peace, and have these infernal roads levelled!—how plainly I remember you as you looked that day when I met my fate at the Royal! I had gone with Jack Thornton to see his burlesque rehearsed, but all I saw was you. You wore a green merino frock with darns in it, Mrs. Theobald. You had shabby pink roses in your hat; and I stood, in vain, trying to contain my feelings, in the slips, and fell in love with you as you danced!"

A blush like an April sunshine crosses Jane's face. Sweet, trebly sweet, from their rarity, are words like these from Theobald's lips! She can forgive—she thinks she can forgive—Lady Rose all that poor, stunted, artificial ball-room flirtation, on the strength of them!

"I can never believe you fell in love with me, looking as hideous as I must have looked that day," and her hand returns to his. "When I was dressed I wasn't ugly, I know, but the prettiest girl that ever lived couldn't look well dancing battements in a green merino dress and a shabby hat."

"Jenny, did I, or did I not, come and speak to you the moment the class broke up?"

"That was nothing. Anyone might have done that without falling in love."

"And didn't you say that for no earthly consideration would you allow me to see you home, and then didn't I see you home—it rained, too—all the way to Waterloo Road, and I held my umbrella over your head, and got wet through myself?"

"And then how soon you began to get

jealous," adds Jane; "jealous of old Adolphe Dido, who had known me since I was a baby, because he called me 'my dear'—as if everyone in a theatre didn't call everyone else 'my dear;' jealous of poor little Montague Stokes, because he happened to be my lover in the piece; jealous of everybody. You have quite left off being jealous, Mr. Theobald, by the way!"

"Yes, my dear Jane," says Theobald, and he draws his wife to his side, to the detriment of her muslin frills, and kisses her. "I leave that branch of domestic duty to you, now."

CHAPTER XV

THE CIGARETTE OF PEACE

The house in which Lady Rose Golightly lives was built by the good old duke, her grandpapa, while he was still Marquis of Fitzgermain. It goes by the name of Beaudesert's Folly and its architecture bears a modest resemblance to that of the Brighton Pavilion, which royal building was, indeed, erected by the gracious prince and friend of the Beaudesert family at about the same date as the "Folly."

"Mine is the most ridiculously ugly house in England," Lady Rose says, herself, probably with justice. And still, every received canon of art, of taste, put aside, Beaudesert's Folly is not without a certain specious attractiveness of its own. It was built to humour the whim of a certain French lady, in whose opinions art went for little indeed, pleasure for everything; built, as its name implies, for the sojourn of "Folly" during six or eight summer weeks. And it, at least, fulfils the object of its existence. There is a panelled gewgaw banqueting-room, all white and gold, and blue and crimson, and with so many stained "Gothic" windows opening to the ground, that to dine there is the next thing to dining in the open air itself. And there is a small amber Chinese drawing-room, faded from its pristine beauty, but whose warm colouring and subdued light doubtless suited the swarthy complexion of its first occupant, as they now suit the London-bleached cheeks of Lady Rose Golightly. And drawing-room and banqueting-room alike open upon a terrace; and in the garden outside plays a fountain, so close that you can hear the cool splash of the water as you dine. . . . . What astonishing effects these panelled walls, that garden terrace, might produce if they would only break suddenly into speech before some of the discreet Chalkshire people—Mesdames Coventry Brown and Crosbie, for instance, or the venerable Archdeacon and his wife—when these worthy souls come to pay their little court to Lady Rose! For history, however many hard things it may have to say of the Beaudesert family, has always allowed them the negative virtue of knowing how to enjoy themselves, and three successive Beaudesert generations have now, during about ten weeks of the year, enjoyed themselves at The Folly!

Under Lady Rose's *régime* fewer cakes are eaten, perhaps, less ale drank, than under the *régime* of her predecessors (although many a lively dinner-party, or impromptu supper, is held in the banqueting-room of The Folly, whereof the Chalkshire world knows nothing). The house was made over to her for her lifetime by her brother, the present duke, at the time of her marriage—made over with the strictest legal prohibitions against poor George Golightly's ever having the right to cross its threshold without his wife's consent. And a very pleasant little summer retreat, or harbour of refuge, Lady Rose finds it now in her life of quasi-widowhood. When she is in want of money—Lady Rose is often in want of money—and has let her town house, there is always the ridiculous minaretted roof of The Folly to shelter her; when she turns sick of everything in town—dress, lovers, rouge, scandal, herself; herself most of all—there are always the roses and carnations of The Folly gardens to nurse her back to peace. A distinct vein of poetry runs through the many-coloured composite of which Lady Rose Golightly is formed. Woman of the world, steeped to the lips in worldliness though she is, she can feel nature, June nights, July flowers, the love-song of the thrush and nightingale, still. But then she must feel it all in company! Carnations in the afternoon; a French dinner and champagne, and four or five pleasant men and women, bringing with them the last stories from town, afterwards. The love-songs of the nightingale; but songs from human lips as well; and coffee on the terrace and a stroll through the moonlit gardens, and a cigarette or two, and Badminton to finish the evening.

I repeat it, less cakes and ale are consumed now than formerly at The Folly; but cigarettes, champagne, and sentiment have replaced them. The Lady Rose Golightly of our virtuous Victorian era, in short, has succeeded the noisy male Beaudeserts and their associates of other days. But what a world of social reform, what a revolution, not in manners only, but in morals, is implied in those few words.

"Everyone is here, I think, Mrs. Brown, except the Theobalds. As they are strangers in the land I suppose we must give them ten minutes' law still?"

The amber and muslin curtains of Lady Rose's drawing-room are closed just sufficiently to soften the effect of western sunbeams upon evening complexions, without excluding the cool, flower-scented air from the garden; and Lady Rose, never so charming as in her own house, is chatting away that dreariest prelude to pleasure in human life, the interval before dinner.

"The Theobalds!" repeats Mrs. Coventry Brown, turning herself slowly, as on a pivot, in her mulberry satin. She is a vast, mild, pulpy-looking blonde, this Oracle before whose utterances all Chalkshire trembles, a scantily-

draped blonde of fifty, with white roses mysteriously pinned upon a bald head, with great wide-open, yellow eyes, a soft, purring voice, and a creamy smile. "I did not quite catch you, dear Lady Rose. Is it possible the poor Miss Theobalds feel equal to going into society already?"

"Oh, I don't mean the Miss Theobalds," Lady Rose answers; "I am not good enough to aspire to intimacy with the Miss Theobalds. The people I expect are the new arrivals, Francis Theobald, of Theobalds, and his wife."

"Ah! *In*deed!" Mrs. Coventry Brown draws her lips close, runs her eyes round the room, then drops them upon the fine, massive foreground of her own bare arms, and gives the white roses on her head a little depreciatory shake. "Mr. Francis Theobald was at the flower-show yesterday, I believe?" she remarks, an obtrusive emphasis on the "mister."

"And his wife too; didn't you see her? They came away with me. She is rather a nice-looking person—ah! there's a ring; it must be them. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Crosbie?" Lady appeals to Rawdon Crosbie, who has instantly hovered near at the mention of Jane's name. "Mr. Theobald's wife is rather a nice-looking person?"

Rawdon thinks Mr. Theobald's wife one of the prettiest women he ever saw in his life, and, being too young and too unversed in the world's ways to discern the error of honest partisanship, says so, boldly.

"Well, there I cannot agree with you," cries Lady Rose, a little sharply. "She has a nice complexion, certainly, and a pair of blue eyes—but no features. And then, such an absence of style!"

"But, my dear Lady Rose, what can one expect?" purrs Mrs. Coventry Brown in a woolly whisper. "The marvel is, I think (and a great relief it must be to the poor Miss Theobalds), that a person from such a position as that should be noticeable at all."

"Come, come, Mrs. Brown, no scandal about Queen Elizabeth! I have theatrical blood in my veins, you know;" Lady Rose is fond of thus openly adverting to the one notorious blurr upon the Beaudesert scutcheon; "and I never will hear a word against the sock and buskin. If Mrs. Theobald is nice, I, for my part, shall like her just as well as if she were the daughter of a prince. But then, I care nothing for birth. I am an out-and-out republican."

Now Mrs. Coventry Brown's father, men say, began life humbly in the retail hosiery business. Her husband, all the world knows, was a Manchester cotton-seller. She is, therefore, aristocratic to the backbone, and the very word "birth" jars harshly on her susceptibilities.

"I think we must admit, my dear Lady Rose," a peony flush rising over her large blonde face, "I think we must admit that there are parvenoos and *parvenoos*. Also that it is a duty"—I am afraid Mrs. Coventry Brown pronounces it "dooty," for when she is vexed she forgets her pronunciation sometimes—"to make distinctions between them."

Before Lady Rose can answer, the door is thrown open, and the innocent objects of the discussion make their appearance. Theobald *debonair*, self-possessed, graceful, a man of men now as ever in Lady Rose's sight; Jane, shyer than she would be if she were facing a couple of thousand spectators from behind the footlights, upon his arm. She has never, it must be borne in mind, entered a drawing-room containing ladies, unless it be the public drawing-room of a foreign hotel, until this moment. Theobald married her from the stage, an ignorant child of sixteen, and has introduced her to no society, save the society of men, since. She knows not a law, a tradition of what, with pleasant irony, is called our social intercourse. And yet, by accident, inspiration—who shall say what teaches women (never men) the secrets of a class to which they were not born?—she transgresses against none of them. Some subtle intuition, some acute rendering, perhaps, of the glances Lady Rose bestowed yesterday upon the "extremely brilliant silk," has made her dress in simple white muslin to-night; white muslin high to the throat, relieved only by a knot or two of blue ribbon, and with some carnations from the garden at Theobalds in her hair. She looks a girl of seventeen! A pang of envy contracts Lady Rose Golightly's heart as one of the mirrors with which the room is lined reflects Jane's blooming face in dangerously close contrast with her own faded one. Alas! there is the difference of a dozen years at least between them. But then, recollects Lady Rose, youth does not invariably ride the winning horse in these days. Above and beyond all things, what men desire most is—to be amused. Could a red-and-white, uneducated creature like this amuse any man, above all a man as fastidious as poor Francis Theobald *once* was in his tastes?

She advances and receives Jane with marked cordiality; the Oracle, while the reception goes on, holding her rose-crowned head aloft, and keeping her tawny eyes well fixed upon nothingness. Colonel Mauleverer, Captain Brabazon, Rawdon, all came forward. Jane's shyness begins to vanish; and Lady Rose, I must say, seems bent upon fulfilling the pleasant, hollow duties of a well-bred hostess to the uttermost.

"Loo, my dear," and she turns to a lady who, till now, has been talking to Colonel Mauleverer in the background, "let me introduce you to Mrs. Theobald. My own familiar friend," this with a smile to Jane, "Miss Childers."

Loo Childers, the familiar friend ("the lost soul" say unkind tongues) of Lady Rose Golightly, is one of those mature girls of the world whereof the present age is so fertile. If the semi-detached matron be the salt, the wholly-detached maiden may surely be called the pepper of society in our times. Loo Childers, the second daughter of an exiled and impoverished peer, knows everybody, goes everywhere, does everything; even to writing a book of travels. She

is a couple of years younger than Lady Rose, and pretty in a certain quaint style. A complexion tanned by yachting, yellowed by cosmetics, by late hours, by hard work of all kinds, but good still under the chandeliers; hair of dazzling gold, save near the roots, where the natural brown is apt to assert itself; a somewhat over-full figure; a speaking smile, and the best cut foot in London; these are Loo Childers' personalities. And in a certain kind of race, not the race matrimonial, nineteen out of twenty young and handsome girls might compete with Loo Childers in vain. No doubt about *her* power of amusing Why, she amuses herself, to the never-ending astonishment of poor, disillusioned, unamusable Lady Rose. "How I wish I had your irrepressible taste for life, Loo! If you were in my place, I wonder if even you could amuse yourself?" she said once. "Of course I could," was Loo's answer; "I should run about all over the world, and take Mr. Golightly with me." But, unfortunately, that is not quite Lady Rose Golightly's idea of amusement.

Dinner is announced while Miss Childers is still talking, good-naturedly patronising, to Jane, and Rawdon Crosbie's heart beats high with hope. He has overheard Lady Rose tell off the martyred Colonel to Mrs. Coventry Brown. He has a vague idea that she intends to keep Captain Brabazon for herself, and that in the disposal of the intervening, unimportant couples Jane will fall to him. He finds that he has reckoned without his hostess. Lady Rose gives a quick little look at Captain Brabazon. "Now," the look says, "take the poor person you made me invite off my hands; talk to her; keep her quiet, as you promised, for the rest of the evening." Another moment and Jane, on Captain Brabazon's arm, is leaving the drawing-room, and Rawdon is crushed! He doesn't care what becomes of him; he would just as soon take Mrs. Coventry Brown as anyone else now.

"Mr. Smylie," says Lady Rose's pleasant voice, "will you take Miss Childers?" Mr. Smylie is the curate of the parish, asked, at the eleventh hour, as a safe and canonical make-weight against Mrs. Coventry Brown. "Mr. Crosbie — Miss Brown. And last of all, Mr. Theobald, will you take me?"

So the party is arranged. The dining-table is round, and as Theobald is on Lady Rose's right, and as Jane must not be next her husband, and as the Theobalds must be parted as widely as possible from the Coventry Browns, it becomes almost mathematically demonstrable that Rawdon Crosbie's place shall be between the Oracle and her daughter. And here, accordingly, he finds himself; Jane nearly opposite, with Brabazon and Mr. Smylie on either hand.

He has never loved any member of the Brown family. Oh, how fervently he hates them now! Augusta Brown is a white, purring, yellow-eyed little woman, half the size and age of her mother, but precisely like her in all essential points; and before they have done their soup she has launched forth some very small, very under-bred jest at Rawdon respecting his coming marriage.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Brown," he says, with the look and manner of a decidedly dangerous young bear. "I did not quite follow the drift of your remark?"

She repeats it, adding a hope that she will be "allowed to officiate as bridesmaid;" and Rawdon, glancing across the table, sees Mrs. Theobald watching him, a smile lurking in the corners of her lips. His mood upon this changes. He makes the sprightly Augusta some confidential and amicable reply, puts on an air of gratitude when, a minute later, Mrs. Coventry Brown, herself, turns and whispers her word of nauseous congratulation. Then, swiftly—right, left—he drives home two small shafts of sarcasm, pointed enough to make their way even through the tough armour of self-conceit with which the Coventry Browns are panoplied. And then he is left in peace. Mrs. Coventry Brown, the mother of two marriageable daughters, lays vicarious siege to the Colonel's time-hardened old heart during the remainder of dinner. Augusta picks up whatever stray crumbs of attention Captain Brabazon may have to bestow upon her. Rawdon is left to his own thoughts, and to the occupation of furtively watching Jane, and comparing her in his own mind with this gathering of received, accredited members of society by whom she is surrounded.

How well she stands the test! With the Coventry Browns—purse-proud, vulgar Pharisees as they are, women mean of soul and heart as of feature, yet before whose guineas everyone in the county (his own people included) bow down—with the Coventry Browns, Rawdon Crosbie will not even compare her. But with Loo Childers, with Lady Ro[illegible] Both of these women are young, still; [illegible]th good-looking; both versed in the easy graces, the unaffectedness of manner which knowledge of the world alone can give. But how charmless Jan[illegible] presence renders them in Rawdon's eyes! Lady Rose wears a rich amber silk to-night, an amber silk that in its prime has had courtly experiences, with jewels of worth on neck and wrists, and genuine point lace trimmings on the Charles II. bodice. Loo Childers is in a brocaded pink "Watteau" that has already seen no little service during its London campaign. And both of them . . . . the word that is coming is unkind, but it expresses what Rawdon Crosbie thinks . . . . both of them look dirty beside Jane, with her clean cheap muslin, and her girl's face, innocent of all cosmetics but open air and cold water. Is this superior cleanliness surface-deep only, or does it reach the heart as well? Young Rawdon is as yet no moralist; and all the observations he makes, on men and manners, are superficial ones.

With a party of ten people at a round table, conversation ought to be general; but from the conflicting nature of the elements brought together to-night the talk has an irresistible

tendency to break up into duets. Lady Rose sets the example. However the rest may fare, surely Mr. Theobald should be contented; food cooked by an artist, good wine, neither under nor over iced, and as perfect a hostess as Lady Rose, devoted to himself! The subjects of interest between these two persons seem inexhaustible. Jane, with the keen sixth sense of nascent jealousy, can hear them in the midst of all her own lively small talk with Captain Brabazon. "You remember that evening at Richmond?" "Have you forgot that Derby day?" "You know, of course, that poor Jack Halliday has married her at last." "Can you believe that little Lord Alfred has gone on a mission to the Jews?" They have a common past: the one bond of union that has always been wanting between Theobald and herself. The badly-used old Colonel, with three pretty women at the table, finds himself hopelessly made over to Mrs. Coventry Brown, and eats and drinks in silence. Loo Childers and the curate carry on the one really business-like flirtation of the party.

"If you insist upon giving me Mr. Smylie," said Loo, when she and Lady Rose talked over the arrangements of the table at their five o'clock tea—"If you insist upon giving me the curate of the parish, Rose, I shall be obliged to propose to him. I tell you so fairly, beforehand."

And she evidently means to keep her word.

Mr. Smylie is a very pleasant-spoken, pleasant-looking little fellow. An aunt, from whom he expects money, did not think his head strong enough for competitive examinations, so, to please her, he devoted his youth to hard boating at Cambridge, and a few months back entered the church without special bias for or against the vocation. He has fair curly hair, and a fair little much-cared-for moustache, which the good old rector has not had the heart as yet to bid him cut off. Also he has a fair and boyish complexion, through which blushes not a few mantle as Loo Childers improves his mind and raises his spirits by lively commentaries on the different social events of note that have come off during the past season in town.

The Miss Coventry Browns, the Miss Pippins, all the slow and irreproachable young ladies of the neighbourhood, have, in turn, been recommended to Mr. Smylie since his arrival in the parish. "There are the Miss Coventry Browns, Smylie; well-brought up girls. No one ever breathed a word against the Miss Coventry Browns; and money, too; just the young women for clergymen's wives. Or if not the Miss Browns, the Miss Pippins. Less money, certainly, and rather older; but, if possible, better suited to a parsonage fireside, and all musical. With two such families as the Browns and Pippins to choose from, no parish priest need long be without the blessing of a good wife."

And now, yes, by the time they have reached the second course, Mr. Smylie's depraved heart tells him that the kind of companion he would prefer by a parsonage fireside is—not a well-brought up Miss Brown, not even a musical Miss Pippin, but a rattling dread-nought, go-ahead young person of the world, like Loo Childers. Such is curate nature!

"You see I am keeping my word, Rose," she whispers to the hostess as the ladies are on their way to the drawing-room: Mrs. Coventry Brown, like a full-rigged war-ship, sailing first, Jane's slim figure following so close that she all but trips herself up over the dowager's spreading train. "We are getting on splendidly, considering my inexperience of curates. I mean to have the final scene in full force when the moon rises."

Lady Rose Golightly sets her face strongly against the modern fashion of men leaving the dining-room with the ladies: theory and observation alike telling her that the innovation is based upon radically false views of human nature. The wine at The Folly, unlike most establishments without a responsible masculine head, is unexceptional (the butler is a servant of a good many years' standing in the Beaudesert family), and all the more intimate frequenters of the house know that their hostess regards their absence, for an hour at least, from the drawing-room, as a matter of course.

So for one hour, for one mortal hour, Jane, unsupported, has to bear up against the society of her own sex. After showing her the azaleas at the flower-show, and driving her from the flower-show back to Theobalds, and now, for form's sake, asking her to accompany her husband on his *first* visit to The Folly, Lady Rose feels that she has, in every possible way, "behaved well" to Francis Theobald's wife, and troubles her head very little more about her. For two or three minutes the ladies, irregularly grouped, remain standing, Mrs. and Miss Coventry Brown twittering forth their praises of the delightful gardens of The Folly, and the delightful view from The Folly windows, Lady Rose responding by languid nonentities. Then all subside, as ladies are prone to do after dinner, into their waiting-places. Miss Augusta Brown perches herself, with childish simplicity, on a little ottoman, which immediately commands the door, and turns over a book of photographs; Mrs. Coventry Brown sinks—like a big protecting angel in a mulberry satin—upon a sofa near her daughter. Loo Childers and Lady Rose draw their chairs to the bay window, and looking out upon the twilight, tempered enough to be admitted freely now, begin to chat together. Jane is nowhere. Yes, she is far away from Mrs. Coventry Brown. That, at all events, she feels, is one advantage. And she is near enough to hear what Lady Rose and her own familiar friend talk about. That is another, and a more doubtful one.

They talk about everything under the sun—I mean the London sun, to whose pure rays Miss Childers bade good-bye this morning—and they talk about everything with the outspokenness of their class and generation. People of the

stamp of Mrs. Coventry Brown may hint away reputations if they choose, thinking ambiguity elegance. Lady Rose and Loo Childers hint nothing. They call men, things, and actions, by their proper names; and as Jane listens to them her blue eyes open wider and wider with wonder.

Under ordinary circumstances, histories of Lord George and Sir Harry, with the fair ladies rightly or wrongfully belonging to such histories, might, perhaps, however plainly narrated, be *caviare* to her. But it happens just now that a notable patrician romance, or, as the newspapers vulgarly call it, "case," arrests the attention of the public. And to this romance Loo, from private sources of her own, is able to add circumstantial and detailed information for Lady Rose's benefit. So Jane knows accurately on what ground they tread; and, I repeat it, her eyes open wider and wider with wonder as she listens.

What manner of women, she speculates, are these who talk? If they were ballet girls she could take their measure quickly and concisely enough. But they are ladies of birth and education, ladies belonging to a world whose inner sanctuaries her foot may never profane while she lives. And Mrs. Coventry Brown—moral judge and censor of all Chalkshire—where is her morality now? Mrs. Coventry Brown sits, her fat white arms folded, her yellow eyes gazing through the window, with the serene consciousness of unassailed virtue, and of being the guest of a duke's daughter on her lips. Does she hear and understand? Does Augusta, listening without a blush, as a well brought up girl should be able to listen to anything, understand? Jane, outer barbarian as she is, can only wonder. And the twilight deepens, and the talk flows freer, if that be possible, than before, and Loo has just reached a culminating point, which makes even Augusta pause as she turns over the pages of her book, when in comes a servant bearing lights and coffee, followed, three or four minutes later, by Rawdon Crosbie.

Rawdon glances round the room, sees in a second that Jane is "shunted," and pursuing his way boldly past Mrs. and Miss Coventry Brown, gets possession of the vacant chair by her side. The Colonel and Captain Brabazon make their appearance next and then Lady Rose proposes an adjournment to the gardens—where the flowers are smelling sweet, and the stars shining, and where Jane's oppressed lungs begin once more to breathe freely.

"I hope I shall never, *never* find myself alone in a room with ladies while I live," she remarks to Rawdon, who keeps, jealously faithful, at her side.

"What, not with such exquisite specimens of ladyhood as Augusta Brown and her mother?"

"I wasn't thinking of them particularly. I'm afraid, not being a lady myself, I should feel out of place among ladies of any kind—just that. By-the-by, Rawdon,"—what has become of the formal "Mr. Crosbie?" Jane herself could not tell you; to call young fellows of Rawdon's age by their Christian name is, I imagine, one of the habits of old days that clings to her unawares —"by-the-by, Rawdon, how fond you seem to be of the Coventry Browns. Say a favourable word for me with them—there's a good boy."

"A favourable word from me would go so far! Mrs. Theobald, it's wrong, under any circumstances, to want to strangle one's fellow creatures, isn't it? You are better posted, I'm sure, than I am in the whole duty of man."

"You don't want to strangle me, I hope?" says Jane.

"I wanted, desperately, to make an end of Augusta and her mamma at dinner. Nothing but my regard for Lady Rose prevented me from doing it."

"Oh, you, like everybody else, have a great regard for Lady Rose Golightly, then?"

"Sufficiently great to keep me from spoiling one of her nice little dinner-parties, certainly."

"And Miss Childers? You admire her, too, of course?"

"No, I leave that to Smylie. Abject and abandoned though my own condition was during dinner, I kept my eyes well opened you see, on all you people who were amusing yourselves, Mrs. Theobald."

"Amusing ourselves! I amused myself chiefly with looking at Mrs. Coventry Brown," says Jane, lightly. "I know that I've made her my enemy for life—as if I had not enemies enough already!—but I couldn't help it. Talk of the ballet! I'm sure no ballet ever furnished fitter case for the Lord Chamberlain than Mrs. Coventry Brown in a ball-dress. And then the three white roses on that dear old bald head! You are an intimate friend of the family—tell me, how are they fastened on? Glue, tin-tacks, a spring—which?"

They jest, they laugh. From the other side the garden, Jane's clear laugh rings obnoxiously in Mrs. Coventry Brown's ear, as this admirable woman and her daughter stand alone together upon the terrace. Two gentlemen are still absent in the dining-room. Mr. Theobald, for a good many years now, has eschewed ladies' society, and improves every occasion of keeping aloof from them as long as possible; the curate, much as he admires Lady Rose's friend, admires Lady Rose's claret more. As a natural consequence, Mrs. Coventry Brown and her daughter stand deserted, while the dresses of Lady Rose, Loo Childers, and Jane may be seen, each with an attendant black coat, flitting slowly about among the garden shadows.

"I call it most discreditable of him," says Mrs. Coventry Brown. "Lady Rose is eccentric; we all know what the Beaudeserts are," raising a significant finger to her forehead, "and a woman of her rank can, or thinks she can, invite anybody. There was the old Duke used to have Giles, the tobacconist, to dinner, and what was more, invite very good people to meet him. But for Rawdon Crosbie—an engaged man—and such a fortune as Emma Marsland's at stake! I shall make a point of driving over to The

Hawthorns"—The Hawthorns is the name of Mr. Crosbie's place—"and letting poor, dear Mrs. Crosbie know my opinions."

"Rawdon Crosbie is a horrid bear," says Augusta. "I'm sure, how Emma Marsland could have accepted him!—but then, she never had another beau, that's one thing. What a tawdry made-up creature that Loo Childers is, ma! I could see the paint on her face at dinner, thick; and how she flung herself at Smylie! And, law, how low she talks, ma! Did you hear what she was telling Lady Rose?"

"It might be low for you, child, or for me," answers "ma" in a tone of admonition. "But these things are very different for the aristocracy. *Honny swore*, Augusta—evil be to him that evil thinks. The aristocracy, my dear, see so much of fashionable levity that they cease to think any harm of it. If you've a chance, Gussy, make friends with Miss Childers. She is the daughter of a peer, recollect. She might be of great use in getting us introductions the next time we go to town."

It is ten o'clock before Theobald and the curate make their appearance on the lawn. At a quarter past ten Mrs. Coventry Brown's carriage, to Lady Rose's intense relief, bears its precious freight out of The Folly gates. Colonel Mauleverer's dog-cart, the Theobalds' hired fly, and the Crosbies' phaeton, drive up to the side entrance about eleven. And all this time Lady Rose has not had five minutes alone with Theobald; all this time Mr. Smylie's affections are not legitimately compromised!

Everybody is loitering still, glad to enjoy freedom and fresh air out of doors; and Loo Childers and the hostess walk round to the side of the house to see their friends depart. The dog-cart, with Mauleverer and Brabazon, starts first; then Jane bids good-night, and gets into the hired fly, Theobald preparing to follow.

"You are all going shamefully early," says Lady Rose, not offering to shake hands with him. "This is the best hour of the twenty-four. Loo and I are just going to light the cigarette of peace. Oh, yes, Mr. Smylie, you may be shocked, but we are desperate smokers both of us! Won't you stay and keep us in countenance?"

"It's nearly Sunday morning already, I'm afraid," says Mr. Smylie, blushing up to the roots of his flaxen air in the dark.

"Sunday! Well, what of that? Do you never smoke on Sunday? Now, if you stop, we can take you home by a short way, can't we, Loo? through the back garden and over the fields. We shall take care of you till you are in sight of your own church spire, Mr. Smylie, I promise."

The curate hesitates, and is lost.

"No use to ask you to join us, of course?" says Lady Rose, looking up suddenly into the face of her old lover. "Theobalds isn't half a mile further than Mr. Smylie's house . . . if you will!"

Her voice sinks: the kindly starlight poetizes the age, the sallowness of the face that once, for a brief space, was the one beloved face on earth to Francis Theobald.

He has not an ounce of sentiment in his composition; but a man may like a cigarette, in the company of a pleasant woman, on a summer night, without possessing much sentiment.

"Jenny would be afraid to drive home by herself," he remarks, but with more compliance than there ought to be in his voice.

"Oh, not in the least! I am afraid of nothing," cries Jane, very short and cold. "Tell the man to drive on, please."

And, really before Theobald's conscience has had time to turn round, Mrs. Theobald has driven away: thrown him into the very open jaws of temptation. Such is the consequence of one's wife having a fiery temper!

Close beside The Folly gates, on the way towards Theobalds, rises one of the stiff, breakneck hills for which Chalkshire is famous. The fly commences the ascent at the rate of about a mile and a half an hour, and Jane is just communing within herself as to whether she shall or shall not cry over Theobald's wicked defection, when a tall man's figure makes its appearance walking quietly along at the side of the carriage. She chokes back her rising tears, and leans her face out eagerly. It is Theobald, rescued from the hands of Lady Rose and Loo Childers—alas! it is only Rawdon Crosbie: Rawdon Crosbie, whose fate it seems to be to come across Mrs. Theobald at all times when an upholder or a friend is wanted. Now she must drill herself sharply: show never a suspicion of the cruel demon of jealousy that is taking possession of her thoughts. "You here, Rawdon?" There is a change, a ring of subdued sadness in her voice, and Rawdon Crosbie interprets it not unfavourably to himself. "Is this the road that leads to The Hawthorns?"

"All roads lead to The Hawthorns, or can be made to lead there," says Rawdon. "Are you aware that you went away without wishing me good-bye, Mrs. Theobald?"

"Did I? oh, where's the use of so many formalities between friends? You were saying good-night to Lady Rose and Miss Childers—that's the truth. How could you remember to think of poor insignificant me?"

The hill that Rawdon has always thought the longest, weariest pull in Chalkshire, is climbed only too quickly. The flyman mounts on the box: the jaded horses stop for a minute to get back their breath. A delicious calm and sweetness broods over all the widespread upland. The chirping of a grasshopper close at hand, the tinkle of a distant sheep-bell among the chalk-hollows: every softest sound, far or near, is heard with curious distinctness through the dead quiet of the night.

"And we must say good-bye really," cries Jane, giving Rawdon her hand. "I am not going to be so rude, you see, this time."

. . . All she wants is to be alone; alone with

her own thoughts, her own sorely wounded heart. Rawdon Crosbie is no more to her than one of the stiff, wind-shorn elm trees that are ranged like sentinels along the straight, white road; but her hand trembles as it rests in his; and he stands (the discreet family coachman drawing his own deductions as he watches events from the phaeton) and gazes in a sort of dream at the dingy hired fly that bears her from him. . . .

'Now I call this delightful," says Loo Childers, when the sound of carriage-wheels has died away. "Why isn't there a rule that no party shall ever consist of more or less than four people? Have you got your cigarette-case, Rose?"

No; Lady Rose's cigarette-case is indoors, and Loo, accompanied by the curate, goes in search of it. Towards midnight they all drink Badminton and smoke the cigarette of peace together on the terrace, and at some later hour of the night or morning start off in the yellow moonlight to look for the spire of Lidlington church.

So ends Mr. and Mrs. Theobald's first experience of one of Lady Rose Golightly's nice little dinners.

CHAPTER XVI

CHAMPAGNE FROM TUMBLERS

Miss Charlotte Theobald is not a woman to be turned from the performance of any righteous duty by a single rebuff. Whatever the shortcomings of Francis, whatever the levity of his unfortunate wife, Miss Charlotte remembers that he is *her brother* still, and as such entitled to her advice and surveillance. The elder sister, a wiser woman in her generation, is for leaving the new owners of Theobalds as much as possible to themselves. "We shall never think with their thoughts, nor they with ours, Charlotte. We have paid our first visit, they have returned it; and we were out. The thing is done. Causing scandal in the neighbourhood?" The domestic concerns of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Theobald are already furnishing conversation for a good many idle Lidlington tongues. "But then we always knew they *must* cause scandal! When Francis refused to wear mourning for his own first cousin it was easy to foresee the rest. A man who can turn a sacred duty into a jest once, will do so again; and the best and most prudent thing for us is to leave them as much alone as possible."

But it is not in Charlotte Theobald's nature to leave anything or any person alone so long as she has the power to disturb it. She has heard of the flower-show, of Lady Rose Golightly's dinner-party—of everything: has even heard that they have hired another cook; "on their income attempting to keep three servants at Theobalds!" She must give Francis her mind on all these points. He may go to ruin—he may go to ruin, as he has been going there throughout his whole life! But it shall never be said that inertness, indifference on the part of his sister Charlotte, helped to grease the wheels for him in his descent. Accordingly, on the Saturday succeeding Lady Rose's dinner, the white nose of Diocletian, at two precisely, stops before the front door of Theobalds, and Miss Charlotte, in a severe voice, inquires if her brother is at home and disengaged? It may or may not be an ill-bred thing to ask for the master of the house instead of the mistress. Miss Charlotte comes not as a fashionable visitor, but as a Christian; a relative performing a solemn and imperative duty. She wants to see her brother, not her brother's wife. And, as I have said, she asks for him; and is admitted.

During the past six days the Theobalds have settled down as much, to use Jane's own words, as they are ever likely to settle in this life. And already the dingy old house is metamorphosed. Doors and windows stand open to the breath of heaven; flowers are in every available nook and corner; heavy curtains, Indian rugs, have been swept away; heavy furniture transferred to garrets. The impress of Jane's airy, artistic taste is over all.

Mr. Theobald is in the pleasantest room in the whole house—a small breakfast parlour, opening out from the big, dreary drawing-room, and looking across the garden towards the west. Here Jane has collected together every tolerably pretty thing she has been able to find: a clock from one room, an inlaid table from another, mirrors from them all. "We shall live in one room," says Jane, "not in twenty. Let us try, if we can, to make that one room habitable." Miss Charlotte casts her eyes around her with horror. The drawing-room looking-glass! The best bedroom clock! The table from the study! Why, Theobalds is dismantled; its altars are desecrated, its gods laid low, to please the sacrilegious fancy of a dancing-girl—another daughter of Herodias! The remains of a meal—breakfast, luncheon, as you may like to call it—is on the table. Theobald and little Captain Brabazon, both in American rocking-chairs (these are new; Theobald made it his especial duty to send to London for easy chairs), are smoking, their legs comfortably elevated, beside the open window.

"Dear! What an atmosphere!" says Miss Charlotte, drawing back with a start, closely followed by one of her most vigorous sniffs.

Theobald throws away his half-finished cigar, and rises to meet her. Captain Brabazon, dreadfully frightened, prepares for instant flight. "We shall see you to-night, then, Theobald? Eight, sharp, mind. I'll just run and say good-bye to Mrs. Theobald." And then off he rushes, following the course of Mr. Theobald's cigar, through the open French window into the garden.

"Sit down, my dear Charlotte; Jenny will be

here directly. I can recommend you that chair," pointing to the one lately occupied, and well impregnated with smoke, by Captain Brabazon.

"I thank you, Francis. Rocking-chairs make me sea-sick, but I will get near the window. I am not accustomed to tobacco-smoke."

Miss Charlotte takes the smallest, most stiff-backed chair she can find, seats herself on its extreme edge, and looks aggressively about her. "You are intimate with the regiment already, it seems," she remarks, after a minute or two.

"Yes; they are a very nice set of fellows," answers Mr. Theobald. "I knew one of them, Brabazon, the man you saw here just now, abroad."

"Indeed. It runs away with a great deal of money entertaining the military, Francis."

"Not in the way I entertain, Charlotte. One or two of them drive over to dinner, and we give them the same dinner we should have had ourselves; or Brabazon breakfasts with me, as he did to-day without any invitation at all."

"Breakfast?" Miss Charlotte looks with a scared eye towards the table. "Oh! you call this breakfast? Cold pie, chickens, wine, at breakfast! I'm afraid you must find Hannah Budd, the servant *we* engaged, a very inefficient cook for you."

"Hannah Budd is certainly not a *cordon bleu*," answers Mr. Theobald. "However, we have been lucky enough to pick up a very tolerable cook—for an Englishwoman—who was leaving the Crown Hotel, at Lidlington. So we are all right."

"And you have dismissed Hannah Budd, I presume? One of the most respectable girls in the parish?"

"No. Blossy took a fancy to her—it's very seldom Blossy takes a fancy to anyone—and so the girl stays as nursemaid. How is Anne, in this hot weather—pretty well?"

"Anne does not complain more than usual. You intend to keep three women servants, then?"

"At present, my dear Charlotte. But, from what I can recollect of English housekeeping, the more servants one has the more one wants, or the more they want; so I daresay a scullery-girl and a maid for my wife will be added to them soon."

"And do you imagine, Francis, that Theobalds and three servants, to say nothing of officers about the house from morning till night, are going to be kept up on six hundred a year?"

Mr. Theobald's glass goes into his eye: he surveys Charlotte's face and figure with attention. Placidly it occurs to him to wonder whether any other man living has, *could* have, such a sister as this!

"Because if you think so, I do not," pursues Miss Charlotte, as he continues silent. "I had heard already, everyone in the neighbourhood knows, the kind of house you keep, and I consider it my duty, pleasant or not pleasant, to tell you that it can't last. That is the object of my visit."

"Thanks, thanks," murmurs Theobald; but faintly.

"I have one or two other things to say to you. Anne advised me to hold my tongue. But I am a very different person to Anne. I never shuffle out of what is right because it happens to be disagreeable. You have resumed your intimacy with Lady Rose Golightly, I am told, Francis?"

She has scored a point against him at last. Too sweet of temper, too thoroughly gentle of mood, is Francis Theobald to say a deliberately harsh thing to any woman; but just for one second it does enter his soul to bid Charlotte mind her own business and be—pleased to leave him in peace. Ever since his return from the memorable Sunday morning walk his domestic life has been rendered bitter to him on the score of Lady Rose Golightly. Jane is not a woman to let jealousy consume her heart in silence, as so many women do—in romance. She has given Theobald her opinion with entire frankness as to the conduct of Lady Rose, Loo Childers, himself; has warned him that if he goes to bachelor entertainments at The Folly, or in any other way "than as a married man should," encourage Lady Rose's attentions, *et cetera, et cetera*. And now here is Charlotte, most unnatural combination, joining issue with Jane against the common enemy, and the giver of the very best little dinners in Chalkshire! I repeat it, if strong language could ever find its way to Francis Theobald's lips now would be the moment.

Miss Charlotte sees that she has gained vantage-ground, and proceeds:

"I have not forgotten"—alas, when does she forget anything?—"I have not forgotten the talk there was about you and Lady Rose Beaudesert, years ago. And, I can tell you, your renewal of intimacy with a woman who treated you as she did then will be neither to your nor to your wife's credit. The people in this neighbourhood think *nothing* of Lady Rose Golightly."

"They seem rather glad of her acquaintance," Mr. Theobald finds courage to assert.

"In a certain way they may be. I know her extremely slightly myself. We visit, of course, we have never courted her intimacy. Anne and I do not run after the fag-ends of the aristocracy. Yes, in a certain way, I daresay people are glad to know her because of the handle to her name. But no one respects her, and it will do no one any good to be taken up by her. Lady Rose Golightly will ask Tom, Dick, and Harry to her table if they amuse her for the moment."

"Which shows that she has excellent discrimination," observes Mr. Theobald, seriously. "If Tom, Dick, or Harry would only amuse me, I should pretty soon ask them to Theobalds."

"You seem to be doing so, already. But let us talk sense, if you please. Unhappily placed as your wife is, Francis, and though I have met with rebuff from you already, I feel it my duty now to give you a very plain and straightforward

piece of advice. Whatever you may do yourself, don't associate her with the men and women who go to The Folly."

"With Mrs. Coventry Brown, for instance?" Theobald suggests.

"Mrs. Coventry Brown met you by mistake. Do you think Lady Rose did not turn the whole thing into a joke to the first person she met on Monday morning? The people *your* wife will be invited to meet will be the riff-raff Lady Rose gets down from London, and whom she is ashamed of asking the decent people of the neighbourhood to sit at table with."

"Charlotte!"

"Francis, this is a matter of conscience. You must excuse me if my language is not over-nice. Now, can you"—more upright than ever rises Miss Charlotte's slender figure; how she can poise herself on that half-inch of chair at all is a question for an acrobat—"can you, on your solemn word, declare that you consider the goings-on of Lady Rose Golightly and her friend, Miss Childers, to be correct?"

"Good God, Charlotte, how do I know? What judge am I of the correctness of anybody's conduct?"

"Oh, it's very fine to turn it off in that way, Francis. This charitableness towards evil is just the cant, the curse, of the day. Do you consider that Lady Rose Golightly's life of *rioting*, separated as she is from her husband, is the life of an honest, sober-minded, virtuous, Christian matron?"

For a moment Mr. Theobald seems really nonplussed. He strokes his moustache thoughtfully.

"It appears to be a question requiring a great deal of consideration," says Miss Charlotte, spitefully. "I should have thought a plain 'yes' or 'no' could be spoken without so much hesitation."

"But everything depends upon the side from which such questions are viewed," says Mr. Theobald.

"Not at all," interrupts Miss Charlotte. "Fixed Principles are Fixed Principles."

"Yes," says Theobald, crossing his arms and beginning to look argumentative. "And really when one reflects on the uncertainty of human life, the instability of human possessions, one is at a loss to understand how men can burthen themselves with anything of the kind."

"Men! Burthen themselves! With Principles!" ejaculates Miss Charlotte—a sniff for every full stop.

"You spoke of fixed principles, my dear Charlotte."

"I speak of outraging common social decorum when I speak of the kind of life that goes on at The Folly."

"But your reading must have informed you, my dear sister, that all social restrictive rules are arbitrary, a matter of climate more than anything else. The Fee-jee people think it indecorous for relatives to eat from the same dish. In some parts of Peru a man is held a rascal for life if he chance to cut his top teeth first; while among the Chinese, where the seat of intellect is held to be in the stom . . ."

"Francis," cries Charlotte, her pale sharp face on fire, "let me beg of you to stop this ill-timed buffoonery! Anne was right. She knows your nature better than I do. What good can there be in talking reason, in offering advice, to a man who has not one serious idea of life or its responsibilities!"

"What good, indeed?" echoes Mr. Theobald, almost plaintively. "I'm sure, in this hot weather, it's distressing to me to think of your even making the effort—and it was quite a chance your finding me at home. Jenny and I will be in town all next week. Now let me give you a glass of wine? Oh yes, but you must."

And he rises, and, before Miss Charlotte can hinder him, opens a fresh bottle of champagne and pours out a tumblerfull, which he hands to her.

"Champagne! In a tumbler!" ejaculates Charlotte Theobald, horror-stricken. "I should lose my senses for the day if I drank it."

"And if you were to lose them? It does all of us good," says Theobald, cheerfully, "it does all of us good to lose our senses sometimes. Besides, it's more than half froth; why Blossy takes quite as much as that."

Miss Charlotte turns the glass a little on one side, and, eyeing the contents as if she were measuring the exact strength and cost of the wicked broth, sips about a dessert spoonful, then sets the glass down on the table with a little push, as though putting the very suggestion of evil resolutely from her. At this moment the ring of young voices, the sound of Blossy's trilling laugh, make themselves heard from the gardens of Theobalds—the grey old gardens through which, during so many years, neither young voices nor a child's laugh have rung.

"Ah! here are people who won't refuse champagne when it's offered them," says Theobald. "I had better help myself before any of them come in."

"And I will wish you good-day, Francis," cries Charlotte, rising. "I had hoped, I must say, to have had some serious conversation with you—to have found your house, at least, free from company."

"Company? there's no one here but the lad, Rawdon—Rawdon Crosbie," says Theobald, unconcernedly. What is Rawdon to him but a harmless sort of young fellow, who runs about at Jenny's bidding as a good many young fellows have done before, but who, unlike some of his predecessors, does *not* play at *écarté*? "He has been here every afternoon for a week past, helping Jenny in what she calls her gardening."

"Mr. Rawdon Crosbie comes here every afternoon? Gardens every afternoon with your wife? Has Mrs. Crosbie, have the ladies of the family, called on you?"

"No," answers Mr. Theobald. "Thank heaven, they have not."

"Are you aware, Francis, that Rawdon Crosbie is an engaged man?"

"I've heard something of the kind. But I should be sorry to believe it, poor young fellow, at his age."

Yes, Anne Theobald was right. When Miss Charlotte is again seated in the brougham, with the nose of Diocletian turned homeward, she acknowledges to herself that Anne was right, that interference in the affairs of a man like Francis is hopeless. They think not the same thoughts, scarcely do they speak in the same language. Champagne from tumblers in the middle of the day! Rawdon Crosbie gardening for a week together with Mrs. Theobald, and Francis thanking heaven that the ladies of the Crosbie family have not called upon her!

Were the case one of sharper defined offence, of recognised, orthodox wrong-doing, Charlotte Theobald would perhaps feel more leniently, would at least know on what ground she stood. Criminals one may exhort: for criminals one may pray. For people who drink champagne at noon from tumblers, yet live contentedly together and with their child, hardened Bohemians who have kicked over the traces of conventionality without—*as yet*—breaking any of the ten commandments, what shall be done?

Sourer and darker than ever become poor Miss Charlotte's views of human life and human nature as she drives along the sultry Chalkshire roads, and exercises her spirit in vain attempts to solve the question.

CHAPTER XVII

HAS SHE ASKED YOU?

"I'LL tell you what I think," cries Jane, suddenly throwing down the rusty old spade with which she was pretending to dig. "I'll tell you what I think, Rawdon. We'll give up all our grand ideas of parterres and flower-beds, and turn the whole clearing into a croquet ground! We can easily dig up the grass from the hedges, or somewhere, and we'll just have a border of roses and mignonette here, and a summer-house on the other side in the shade. It wouldn't take long to finish."

Mrs. Theobald's ideas on rural matters are about as definite as those of her husband on duty. She never left London till she married; she has lived either in London or in hotels abroad since. Must roses be sown like sweet-peas, or planted like oaks? Jane knows not. She believes blindly in Rawdon's knowledge on such points, and says, "Make a croquet lawn here," or "Have a border of roses there," with perfect confidence as to results.

Blossy, at a few yards' distance, is making a magnificent garden on *her* own principles: pinks, geraniums, every flower she has been able to gather, stuck, on half-inch stalks, into the dry earth. And Rawdon also . . . Rawdon is making a garden in his imagination, the flowers of which have about as much chance of coming to good as Blossy's! Children happy and at play, all of them; but with a difference. Jane's impossible roses, Blossy's rootless geranium stalks, may be succeeded by new toys to-morrow. Rawdon's visionary flowers are of a kind that fades slower, and are more difficult to replace. There is a certain species of aloe that puts forth its petals once only in a hundred years. There is a certain species of happiness, let cynics say what they will, that blossoms once, and once only, in a man's lifetime.

"It wouldn't take long to finish," Jane repeats. "Now suppose we were to set about a croquet lawn at once, when would it be done?"

"Well, we might get the ground levelled this autumn," says Rawdon, "and lay down the turf early in spring. Then, if we have a good spell of wet weather afterwards, you might reckon upon having something like a lawn by summer."

"By *next* summer! A year hence! And pray, why not plant the grass at once?"

"Planting grass, Mrs. Theobald, is an operation in horticulture not carried on, as a rule, under a July sun."

"But, you see, I don't believe in rules! If I want to have a croquet lawn directly, do you mean to tell me it would be impossible for you to make one?"

She throws back her head the better to look at him from under the broad brim of her garden hat, and Rawdon acknowledges, meekly, that he was wrong. What can be impossible that a pretty woman bids one do with such a look as that! No doubt, to please Mrs. Theobald, turf laid in July would thrive well; and shall he—shouldering his spade—go off to the common and begin cutting some at once?

"Not this very second; we have not got the balls yet. And besides, I don't know anything about croquet till someone teaches me. I have watched people play at Cremorne and the Crystal Palace often, but I never could make head or tail of what it all meant. By-the-by, Rawdon, when I've got the lawn, and the balls, and know how to play, who shall I have to play croquet with?"

Jane can never get the better of the accusative case! but Rawdon's ear had grown used to this and all other little grammatical slips.

"You will have me, Mrs. Theobald, for one."

"You—when you are married! Very likely, indeed!"

"When I am married," says Rawdon, stoutly, "You know that I am going to bring my wife to see you. You can have both of us if you choose."

"I don't think three a particularly good number for any game," says Jane, coolly, "and I don't want to count on remote chances. Who else is there? Captain Brabazon, and the Colonel, and the youngsters of the regiment——"

"And I am to put down turf for Brabazon, and the Colonel, and the youngsters of the regiment! No, Mrs. Theobald. There are

some actions not even you could make me commit."

"You think so?" says Jane, looking at him rather saucily. "Wait till you are tried, Master Rawdon Crosbie! Yes, you, till you are married, the people of the regiment, until the regiment goes away. It would be hardly worth the trouble of making a croquet ground for such a short time, would it? But then there's Min —when her engagement is over, I mean to ask Min down to stay with me. Yes; first thoughts are best. I'll keep to what I said."

"And I am to start for the common at once?" says Rawdon, his spade still across his shoulder.

"Don't be foolish. Of course there's no good beginning anything fresh now, and next week we shall be away. Did I tell you we were going up to town on Monday? Well, we are; Theobald and I, for the week. If you can spare time, by-the-by, from your military duties——"

"If I can spare time!" cries Rawdon.

"——You may really go about a little with me to the theatres while we are there. No; there's no good beginning anything fresh to-day, but if you are really bent on being useful I'll tell you what you can do. Take me over to the Lidlington croquet-ground. I think you have told me that a member may take in a visitor once? and I'll judge for myself whether I am likely to care for the game or not."

Take Mrs. Theobald to the Lidlington croquet-ground; the ground of one of the most exclusive clubs in England; of which his mother is secretary; of which six old ladies form the committee, with Mrs. Coventry Brown at their head! Oh, that he had been ordered to cut an acre of turf from the common, to do anything, everything but this! Rawdon Crosbie stands irresolute, getting redder and redder; Jane watches him narrowly.

"Have I asked anything very startling, Mr. Crosbie? Did you not tell me that a member can introduce any visitor he chooses? You'll have to introduce two visitors, by-the-by, for I shall take Blossy."

"I shall be delighted, Mrs. Theobald, delighted . . . . only it is so much pleasanter, don't you think so, here, in the cool, by ourselves?"

"Pleasant but slow. We have had a cool garden, and nothing but a cool garden, for five days, remember."

"Yet I think I remember your telling me you considered gardening was the best fun you had ever had in your life!" cries Rawdon, piqued.

"So I might the first day, or even the second. As long as we were only rooting up and cutting down, it was fun, rather. I think one would be tired of anything in a garden, except the fruit, after two days. I should. I like human faces, and that is why I mean to have a croquet-ground. Now, don't argue, my dear child, but come."

As they enter the breakfast-room by the French window, Mr. Theobald returns to it by the door, after seeing his sister to her carriage. "You have missed one of your relatives, Jenny. Charlotte has been here, making tender inquiries for you and Blossy. You saw Brabazon as he went out?"

"Yes. He said he had left you with a lady whose smoking education had been neglected, and I kept my distance accordingly."

"Poor Charlotte! Her education has been neglected in a good many ways. I made her have some champagne, and she took a teaspoonful like a dose of salts. Help yourself, Crosbie; you look warm. Hard at work at Mrs. Theobald's wonderful flower-garden still?"

"We are going to have no flower-garden at all, but a croquet-ground," says Jane. And then she explains her reasons for the change of plans, and her intention of visiting the Lidlington croquet club this afternoon.

"Don't have me proposed as a member, Jenny," remarks Mr. Theobald, as he kindles a fresh cigar, and returns to his rocking-chair. "I remember the Lidlington croquet people of old. More black-balling goes on among them, in one year, than in all the London clubs put together."

"Black-balling? Good gracious, I hope I shan't be black-balled off the ground!" cries Jane, who has rather hazy ideas respecting this form of ballot.

"Well, no; as Crosbie is a big fellow, there won't be much danger for you. But look after Blossy. A blackball would take her off her legs like a shot. Bloss, have some champagne? 'No, tawberries.' Well, come and eat your 'tawberries' then, and don't dirty your frock before going with your ambitious mother among the nobility and gentry."

"I'm sure I have no ambition! I'm sure I never want to go among nobility, or gentry either, after last Saturday!" cries poor Jane, with her usual ludicrous inability to repress the truth.

In ten minutes' time Blossy's strawberries are despatched, and garden hats and dresses exchanged for walking ones. Just as they are leaving the house, however, Jane remembers that she has something still to say to Mr. Theobald, and returns alone to the breakfast-room. "I shall find you when I come back, Theobald?" She has flown to his side, and is holding her face down to his level for a kiss.

"If you are back in time. Brabazon has asked me to dine at the mess this evening."

"So he told me. Why didn't you say you were going before Rawdon Crosbie?"

"Because—because I forgot all about it, my love," says Mr. Theobald, putting his arm affectionately round his wife's slim waist.

"Oh! Very strange you should forget! Theobald, upon your solemn word of honour, are you asked to anything else? Is there to be any adjournment afterwards to Lady Rose's?"

Now, oddly enough, such an adjournment is in contemplation. Jane has made one of the sharp guesses at truth for which she is famous.

The Folly is situated conveniently close to the Lidlington barracks, and Lady Rose not unfrequently invites some of her military acquaintance to come in after dinner, and finish their evenings with a quiet little round game at her house. Such an adjournment is in contemplation for to-night, and Theobald, exactly half an hour ago, heard of it from Captain Brabazon for the first time. It is a plan by no means to his taste. Play is not play, but the business, the one absorbing interest —I had almost said the one passion—of Francis Theobald's life. He would not exchange a barrack-room and serious loo, played by men, for Vanjohn in a drawing-room with the prettiest women in England, if his own personal inclinations were consulted.

"You can't say no. She has asked you again," cries Jane. "That makes the second time in eight days. I know—little Dolly Standish has told me—she gets them all in there after dinner, and once won *thirty pounds*, herself, in one pool! Oh, I hate a woman who gambles! I hate her! Now, has she asked you? I know she has. A woman who could make you stay, as Lady Rose did, smoking cigarettes till two o'clock on a Sunday morning, is capable of anything. Has she asked you?"

"She has not asked me, Jane," answers Mr. Theobald, steadily, and with rigid fidelity to the letter of the truth. "Brabazon asked me to dine quietly at the barracks—it is not even their guest-day. Lady Rose is your nightmare, Jenny."

"Indeed she is not. Indeed, Lady Rose Golightly never crosses my thoughts. I wished she crossed yours as seldom!"

And saying this, but with her misgivings only half set at rest, Jane departs.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE CAMP OF THE PHILISTINES

SATURDAY is the great day on the Lidlington croquet-ground. When Jane and Rawdon make their appearance the Miss Pippins, the Miss Coventry Browns, with Mr. Smylie, the curate, little Dolly Standish, the youngest ensign of the regiment, and other innocuous youths and maidens, are in the middle of a match for club-gloves. The dowagers, in war-paint and plumes, sit watchful, on benches in a distant and shady corner of the field.

Rawdon Crosbie's tall figure is at once recognised by everybody. The lady at his side must, of course, be Emma Marsland. But who is the child? The new comers advance, under a steady cross-fire of eyes, towards the players; Rawdon, who wishes himself a hundred miles underground, doing his best to look at his ease; Jane smiling and unembarrassed; Blossy tripping on, with her accustomed little ballet-like evolutions, in front. They advance: and the truth dawns upon the united intelligence of the Lidlington croquet club.

"It is not Emma Marsland," says Miss Pippin, the eldest, plainest, most musical Miss Pippin. "It is the—the same person with whom Mr. Rawdon Crosbie was seen to walk about on the day of the flower-show."

Miss Pippin is not among the players. Miss Pippin has reached an age when young ladies, on a croquet-field, as in a ballroom, remain standing until a last set or "scratch" match has to be made up. Her remark is therefore addressed to the sympathies of the dowagers.

"The young Mrs. Theobald!" cries Mrs. Pippin, who in her way—as widow of a general officer, and leader of the serio-mundane, "wordly without side-dishes" section of the Lidlington society—is an authority. Very dried-up, very waspish, very irreconcilable-looking is Mamma Pippin. Common humanity makes you bestow a sigh on dear old meek General Pippin, as you think of the thirty years it took him to die, under Indian suns, at her side. "Dear me, dear me, dear me," Mrs. Pippin talks fast, and talks monotonously: her dry little voice is like nothing so much as the persistent chip, chip, chip of a mason's hammer. "Rawdon Crosbie without Miss Marsland and with the young Mrs. Theobald. What will the club come to next? Mrs. Brown, these things ought to be prevented."

Mrs. Coventry Brown's oracular head turns with its oily, pivot-like action, slowly round. "We have our laws, I believe, Mrs. Pippin. The club has its laws and its bye-laws, and we must act according. Anybody can bring in anybody they like for Once."

A dreadful emphasis is on that monosyllable. "But let them try it a second time," says Mrs. Coventry Brown's tone, plainer than words could speak.

"'Any member of this club shall be entitled to bring in a friend, as a visitor, once,'" says Mrs. Pippin, as if she were repeating a rule of English grammar. "But in framing that law —and I ought to know, for I was one of the original committee—in framing that law the projectors of the club assumed—*assumed* that the friends of members would be persons in society."

"She evidently means to join, too," says Miss Pippin, as Jane and Rawdon pause beside one group of players.

"I shall immediately order my girls to throw down their mallets if she does," says Mrs. Pippin, fluttering up like a barn-door mother who sees the safety of her brood menaced. "A person no one means to visit! Such a thing never happened to the club before!"

Rawdon, meanwhile, is explaining the first principles of croquet to Jane, who listens with attention, and thoroughly regardless of all eyes fixed upon her. "Oh, you must set off at one stick, and try to reach the other, and swing

little bells as you go along. I don't see why I couldn't play croquet, if I tried. I can play billiards. Theobald says I play a very pretty cannon game. Get a pair of hammers, or whatever they are called, and let us make a start at once."

"I am afraid it is against the rules for anyone to touch the 'hammers' until they become members of the club," says Rawdon, getting hot and cold as he receives north pole bows from the Miss Coventry Browns and Pippins. "What do you think of our Lidlington croquet-ground, Mrs. Theobald? Nice situation, is it not?"

They are so near the players that Rawdon knows half a dozen pair of ears at least are listening to him, and he is cowardly enough to talk company-talk for the occasion. Jane finds him out in a second.

"The situation is delightful, Mr. Crosbie. A most romantic view of . . . the Lidlington chimney-pots. Bloss, child, leave everything you see alone." Blossy, under a general impression of the scene being one of hilarity and friendship, has taken up the elder Miss Brown's ball, and is about to bowl it at that young person's toes. "Good little girls are brought to croquet-grounds to look, not touch."

Blossy, thus admonished, stands for a moment irresolute, and with her small hands clutching the ball tight to her chest. Then, fortunately, a magnificent peacock butterfly flutters past; down goes the ball, away rushes Blossy in pursuit; little hands uplifted, little voice giving full cry. The butterfly, with the reprobate levity of its race, makes straight for the bench of dowagers, and straight for the bench of dowagers makes Blossy, much as she would do if it happened to be a bench of bishops. She runs over one of Miss Pippin's muslin flounces; she shrieks her shrill tantivy right into Mrs. Coventry Brown's ear. Finally, the ardour of the chase over, the prey run to earth in a boundary hedge near at hand, she dances back to the bench, takes up her position exactly in front of the august matronhood of Lidlington, and there, with one forefinger on her lips, her blue eyes open and fearless, looks up with the delicious impertinence of her age into their veteran faces.

"Children, dogs, and smoking not allowed," says Mrs. Pippin, quoting law twenty-nine of the club. "This must be seen to, this must be seen to. I shall call a committee meeting."

Something in the chip, chip tone of voice, for certainly she cannot grasp the meaning of the words, takes Blossy's fancy, and forth trills her laugh; that sweet, flute-like laugh of a little child which for pure merriment, I think, is like no other sound this dull old earth of ours ever hears.

"Heavens—look at Bloss!" cries Jane, as she turns her head, and at once realises all the danger of the situation. "Bloss among the old ladies! If they attack her she will show fight. I must go."

And now comes the very crucial test of Rawdon's courage. Where Mrs. Theobald leads he is of course bound to follow, and so has to march up straight, face to face, with that serried and terrible phalanx of the enemy. He takes off his hat to no one in particular, he knows that he is blushing up to the roots of his hair.

"How do you do, Mr. Rawdon Crosbie?" cries Mrs. Pippin, starting up so abruptly as seriously to endanger the equilibrium of the whole bench. "How is your mamma? How is Miss Marsland? We see you so seldom on the croquet ground that I had really forgotten whether you were a member of the club or not. Lydia, my dear! Lydia! It is high time for *us* to go."

And off Mrs. Pippin walks; doubtless to acquaint her girls (young creatures ranging from five-and-twenty upwards), what danger threatens them. Miss Lydia Pippin, after a furtive prussic-acid stare at Jane, follows; the dowagers, each after a furtive prussic-acid stare, follow likewise. No more uncharitable than other old ladies are the Lidlington matrons, but of all human feelings what is so contagious as the spirit of persecution? Mrs. Coventry Brown is left alone.

Not a woman to fly in the hour of peril is Mrs. Coventry Brown. Young Rawdon Crosbie, the secretary's son, may bring doubtful characters upon this croquet ground if he chooses. Not an inch will Mrs. Coventry Brown retreat before them. She spreads out the skirts of her voluminous silk dress; folds her big fingers in their cruelly small, salmon-coloured gloves, one over the other; draws down the corners of her mouth tight; and glares up, as though, under existing circumstances, it were an effort to her to tolerate the existence of creation at large, towards the sky.

If an artist wanted to embody the British dragoness that guards our hearths and homes, the female Philistine, the universal Mrs. Grundy, what a model would Mrs. Coventry Brown, in her chocolate silk and salmon-coloured gloves, and with all the might of rampant virtue upon her brow, offer for his pencil at this moment!

Jane and Rawdon take possession of another bench at about three yards distant, and Jane begins to give her opinions audibly on croquet fields, men, and women; especially on women. She is in her most amusing vein; I think I may call it the vein savouring most freely of ol professional days; and Rawdon laughs aloud; Mrs. Coventry Brown does not laugh. To these, ere long, runs up little Ensign Standish, mallet in hand.

"So glad to see you on the field, Mrs. Theobald. If you join in the next game will you let me be on your side?"

For Dolly Standish is as deplorably ignorant as most young men on all the nicer questions of our social distinctions and moralities.

"I am not to play to-day," answers Jane, speaking with syllabic clearness. "I am not to touch a mallet at my peril until I am a member, Mr. Crosbie says."

"Then be a member," cries the little ensign. "Be a member at once, Mrs. Theobald."

"Be a member! That's very easy to say. First catch your hare. I must find a proposer to begin with, Mr. Crosbie tells me; next a seconder, and, lastly, I must make up my mind beforehand to be blackballed."

"Blackballed! you blackballed!" Dolly Standish evidently considers the joke a good one.

Mrs. Coventry Brown, listening with the very ears of her soul, arrives at promptest resolutions on the moment.

"I'll propose you," goes on the little ensign, "and Crosbie will be your seconder. The thing is done."

"Except the blackballing," says Jane.

"And except that Standish, being only an honorary member, can neither propose nor second anyone," adds Rawdon, who feels singularly ill at ease in his own mind.

But now approaches a fresh ally for Jane in the person of Mr. Smylie. The curate, like the ensign, is deficient, as yet, in his knowledge of the more finely graduated lights and shadows of our social intercourse. He knows that Lady Rose Golightly is tolerably advanced in her opinions, tolerably fast in her paces; he knows, in love though he may be, that Miss Childers does not lag far behind her friend; and he knows, also, that neither his rector nor his parishioners gainsay his daily visits to Beaudesert's Folly.

"To be intimate at such a house, my dear Smylie, to enjoy the society of a woman like Lady Rose, is good in every way for a young fellow just starting in his career. Never run after titles—mean thing, Smylie, mean thing, to run after titles—but lose no opportunity of cultivating the acquaintance of high-born and refined women. It is the best form of culture a young fellow of your age can have."

If the society of Lady Rose and Loo Childers is absolutely an education for himself, how (oh! illogical Smylie) can this young and pretty woman, whose blue eyes are smiling at him now, be detrimental to society at large?

"You are just the man we want, Smylie," cries Dolly Standish; "Mrs. Theobald is going to join the club."

An inarticulate protest rises from the soul of Mrs. Coventry Brown.

"Crosbie is her proposer, will you be her seconder? Delighted, of course. Then we'll see about writing her name down at once."

And away they go—little Standish, the curate, Rawdon—to the rustic croquet-house close at hand, where an official sheet of paper, ready for the names of aspiring members, lies, with official pens and ink, on the table. Another minute and the deed is done; Francis Theobald's wife is at the mercy of a club whereof Mrs. Crosbie is secretary, and Mrs. Coventry Brown the leader and patroness. Then Mr. Smylie and the ensign have to return to their match and to the young ladies who await them, and Rawdon comes back to Jane.

"Your name is posted, Mrs. Theobald. This day week, I hope, you will be a member of the club."

"You need not put such spiteful emphasis on the 'hope.' Why should I not be a member? Nobody knows me, and therefore I conclude nobody will take the trouble to blackball me."

"I'm afraid people will take a great deal of trouble to do malicious things," says young Rawdon, who has been watching Mrs. Coventry Brown's face, and feels the strongest misgivings as to the issue of next Saturday's ballot.

As he speaks, a sound, whose import Jane knows only too well, makes itself heard; a certain little chuckling sound, half exultant, half defiant, by which it is Miss Theobald's habit to relieve her feelings whenever any very piquant bit of mischief she may happen to be engaged upon is consummated. During the past five minutes Blossy's mind and fingers have not been idle. The croquet-balls forbidden, the butterfly out of sight, Blossy at once looked about for some other way of diverting herself, and the means lay at hand thus:—Mrs. Coventry Brown, as I mentioned, is arrayed in a chocolate-hued silk, of costly and massive texture; texture that yields not the seductive *frou-frou*, dear from time immemorial to French story-writers, but that rather bristles and stands out aggressively against all comers. And this silk is garnished round its two-yard-long train with a flounce; in the professional language of Miss Fletcher, "a bias, treble-fluted flounce," to the common eye of man a flounce surmounted by a kind of battlement of small three-cornered hats. To Blossy, quick as lightning, came the horrid temptation of turning each of these flutings or cocked hats into a little dish for a dirt pie. Blossy, when bent on wickedness, has the movements of a mouse, the fingers of a pickpocket. Stealthily watching the enemy's eye, she has been edging round on her knees, her dimpled hands filled with gravel from an adjacent path, during the past five minutes that her mother has ceased to watch her, and lo! the result is betrayed by her usual chuckle of triumphant mischief. The awful chocolate flounce stands stiff on ends as ever, but in every three-cornered battlement rests a little heap of dirt, neatly confectioned into the proper "pie" shape by Blossy's fingers.

Mrs. Coventry Brown looks down, and for a moment is staggered, can scarce take in the enormity of the offence. What, this child of vagrant parents, this offspring of a dancing-girl, to offer such an insult to Her? She clutches her skirt, and Blossy's handiwork flies forth in clouds.

"Bless, my sweet," cries Jane, in her clear, pleasant voice, "take care what you are doing; you will get the dust into your eyes."

Blossy wrinkles up her nose, shows her white teeth, and grasps a handful of gravel, evidently preparing for fresh labours. Rawdon Crosbie rushes forward and snatches the child up in his arms.

"If I had left her another minute it would

have been all over with her," he tells Jane as they walk back across the field; Blossy, in his arms, alternately pulling his moustache (such moustache as Rawdon Crosbie can boast) and bestowing resounding kisses upon his sunburnt cheeks. "I was watching the Coventry Brown eye. Another minute, Blossy, and you would have been eaten, straw hat, boots, and all."

"And I shall be blackballed to a certainty," says Jane. "However, if I am, there'll be one comfort. I can say it was all the fault of Blossy's dirt pies."

CHAPTER XIX

LOVERS

EMMA MARSLAND possesses one of the first great qualifications necessary to insure success in human life. She can eat under the most trying circumstances. Dinner-time comes at The Hawthorns, ten minutes past dinner-time comes, and Rawdon is still absent.

"I don't see why we should wait any longer," says Mr. Crosbie, stopping short in his walk up and down the drawing-room, and appealing with all the animus of a hungry man to his wife. "Rawdon gets more unpunctual every day he lives."

Mrs. Crosbie glances at the heiress.

"What do you say, Emmy, dear? Shall we give Rawdon another five minutes' law or not?"

"The fish will be spoilt if we do," says Emmy, without looking up from her crochet work.

Upon this unromantic decision old Crosbie rings the bell with a will; and two minutes later the trio—the place of the absent Rawdon yawning wide—are seated at the dinner-table.

In spite of being over-boiled, the turbot is excellent, and Emma is helped to it twice. She takes a goodly slice of mutton, a portion of duck with peas, tart, cream, cheese, dessert, and the appropriate fluids. Then she begins to feel sentimental, and to wonder what her truant lover is about. The conversation, at no time particularly brisk at The Hawthorns, flows with greater stagnancy than ever in Rawdon's absence. Mr. Crosbie has remarked during the meal that he met the rector to-day, and thought him looking much too red in the face for health; and not a good red either. A man who has one apoplectic warning should be more careful in what he eats and drinks. Mrs. Crosbie tells them she has paid a visit to Miss Fletcher and finds that the old-fashioned Pamela hats are coming in—indeed, are "well-worn" already—does Emma believe it? Emma contributes her quota to the general stock of ideas by observing that to-day is Saturday, she quite forgets it till now. What more can be expected of any respectable country family than that each member thereof should furnish forth one intelligent and original remark during the solemn hour of repast?

They go up to the drawing-room, and at eight precisely, glorious summer night though it is, a servant brings in the lamps and lowers the blinds, and Emma resumes her lace-work. "Where in the world can Rawdon be?" thinks the poor little heiress, as nine o'clock, half-past nine, comes, and still Rawdon is absent. "Double, treble, draw the stitch through and turn. . . . . At the side of that designing, *wicked* Mrs. Theobald! Yes, her heart tells her so . . . . two, three, and a loop . . . and it was she, herself, who began the acquaintance. Oh, the bitterness of it! Why can't this sort of people be suppressed by Act of Parliament? . . . . Two long, one treble and purl. . . . . Why? Why, because men make the laws, to be sure. Ah, what a world it would be if women could legislate! No ballet girls, no adventuresses, everybody married, nothing but domestic happiness, family dinners . . . ."

"There is Rawdon's step," says Mrs. Crosbie's tranquil voice as she looks up from a letter that has come to her by the evening post. "I felt sure he would not be late, and I really think we must not scold him too much, Emmy. Even Mr. Crosbie, when he was a young man, was late for dinner sometimes."

"I don't call this being late for dinner, mamma; I call it forgetting dinner altogether."

And from Emma's tone it is plain that to forget dinner altogether is to her mind about one of the darkest signs of degeneracy our fallen nature can show.

In five or six minutes' time the drawing-room door opens and the culprit appears. He looks a little frightened, and decidedly red; but he looks something else—happy. Happiness is the one feeling most difficult for human features to mask; and Rawdon is not by nature a good dissembler. He has dined alone with Jane and Blossy, gaily planning over all they will do and see together next week in London, and Jane and Blossy have wandered back with him, in the starlight, long past the boundary line that divides Theobalds from The Hawthorns. A morsel of heliotrope that Jane has worn (though Blossy's hand gave it him) is in his button-hole. If he had to proceed to the scaffold, if he had to sign his marriage settlements and proceed to church, a quarter of an hour hence, it would be the same. Rawdon Crosbie is happy now, and his face betrays him.

"I am so sorry I was late, mother. You did not wait dinner, I hope?"

"We waited ten minutes. Really, Rawdon, I think you might be more punctual, knowing what your father's temper is. If you have not dined, you had better have some cold mutton now."

"Thanks—the fact is—yes, I'll have something by-and-by."

He has got close to Emma, but she does not raise her eyes from her work. He sits down, he

looks at her, and feels most uncomfortably guilty. Conscience, reflected from Emmy's sombre face, tells him that he is not behaving well, that this kind of thing cannot last. He must turn over—certainly he must turn over a new leaf—after next week!

"And what have you been doing with yourself, Emmy?" he asks, in the most affectionately lover-like tone he can compass.

"I have been doing the same as usual," answers Emma, coldly. "I practised all the afternoon." The dismal diurnal exactitude with which Emma practises is a thing, in itself, to give a man a distaste to life. "Of course, if I had known you did *not* intend to take me for a walk, I should have gone to Miss Fletcher's with mamma. I particularly wished to see her new summer bonnets, but as you said nothing about not returning, I kept at home. I have not left the house to-day."

And as she reflects upon the magnitude of the sacrifice, Emma really looks as if she could cry.

"It was the merest accident that kept me," begins Rawdon. "I met someone I wanted to speak to, and the hour for dinner passed, and—and there I was."

He is by no means an adept at prevarication, and it suddenly occurs to him how very fruitless prevarication must be. Are not half the old ladies of Lidlington, is not the posting of Jane's name in the croquet club, witness to the manner in which his afternoon has been spent?

"There you were—where?" says Emma, putting down her work and looking straight into her lover's face. "I did not quite hear what you said."

Rawdon hesitates; to tell the truth he dare not, to tell an untruth he is ashamed. For once, at least, in his life, his mother helps him out of a scrape. "I have just had a letter, Rawdon—Emmy, guess from whom I have had a letter? I would not tell you till Rawdon returned. From Alfred Hervey, my dear. His mother is in town, and they propose that you and I shall run up on an impromptu visit next week, and go to the opera, the exhibitions, the theatres; wherever we like. Now, what do you say, Emmy? Are we to go?"

"Are we to go?" cries Emma, her eyes sparkling. "Mamma, can you ask me? That dear old Adonis! How nice of him to think of it! How lucky I had my new dress home to-day!"

"And Rawdon, being so near London, can be our escort everywhere," says Mrs. Crosbie, looking at her son.

"In the daytime, mother, to exhibitions, or anything of that kind, I shall be delighted," says Rawdon. "But I have had so much leave of late, and the trains to Woolwich are so inconvenient, I am afraid you must not depend upon me of an evening."

"I am quite sure we can depend upon Major Hervey, mamma," cries Emma. "We need put Rawdon to no inconvenience whatever. I do like going to public places with Adonis," adds the heiress, warmly. "Adonis knows everybody, and everybody knows him. Only to be seen with him makes one feel, doesn't it, mamma, as though one was Someone!"

Rawdon gives a little dry laugh. "And so the Herveys have really sent us an invitation!" he remarks. "The first time in their lives I ever knew them send us anything! Be sure you take care of the letter, mother. An offer of hospitality from such an unwonted quarter is a curiosity."

Mrs. Crosbie folds the letter gravely, restores it to its envelope, and puts both into her work-case. "The Herveys have not means, as you very well know, Rawdon, for lavish expenditure. But you have taken up all your father's prejudices, and a very great misfortune for yourself it is that you should have done so, against the best, against the only really *good* connections you have. Our dear old relative, Mrs. Hervey, is staying, as she always does, at Maurice's, with Maria, and the proposal is that Emma and I should stay there for a few days too, and go about London a little with her and Alfred."

"Paying for our own lodgings, and for our dear old relative's cabs and theatre tickets," says young Rawdon. "Ah, I can believe in the invitation now."

"The Herveys are people possessing too much delicacy of feeling ever to allude to money," says Mrs. Crosbie. "If you only knew, Rawdon, as I often tell your father, what a painfully commercial habit of mind is evinced by the continual use of that word 'pay!'"

"Money or no money," cries Emma, "I know that I am only too glad to go, dear mamma. The invitation is to you and me, is it not? or is Rawdon included? I was wondering, this very afternoon, how long it would be before I saw Major Hervey again. I really think—next, I mean, to you and papa—that I am fonder of him than of anyone else in the world."

The colour rises on Rawdon Crosbie's face. For an instant hope, with a rush, takes possession of his heart. Is the recovery of his lost liberty still possible? The feeling is succeeded next moment by a revulsion of curiously sharp jealousy. Could Adonis Hervey ever, in truth, become his rival with Emmy, *his* little, docile, loving, faithful Emmy? He is not mercenary enough to care for Emmy's thirty thousand pounds. He certainly does not care for herself as a man should care for the woman at whose side he means to pass thirty or forty years of life. But still—so contradictory is everything belonging to love and love's twin sister, vanity—the thought, the bare possibility of her marrying anyone but Mr. Rawdon Crosbie is wonderfully distasteful to him!

"And I, Emmy," he whispers, "what place do I hold? A place immeasurably below Adonis Hervey, I suppose?"

"I was not talking of you at all," says Emma, coldly and aloud. "I like you, of course. There is no obligation as regards my feeling for Major Hervey."

Mrs. Crosbie, seeing that a pretty little lover's

quarrel is imminent, rises, like a wise woman, and saying she must talk over the proposed visit with Mr. Crosbie, prepares to leave the room. "Supposing Mr. Crosbie says yes, Emmy?—for, alas! we have not spoken to papa yet—but supposing Mr. Crosbie says yes, do you think we could manage to go with Rawdon on Monday?"

"I don't know about going with Rawdon, mamma. As far as the packing is concerned, I could be ready."

"You forget that to-morrow is Sunday, Emmy," remarks Rawdon, when Mrs. Crosbie has left them alone together. "Even for Adonis Hervey's sake you surely would not be so wicked as to pack on Sunday?"

"I hope you will never do anything worse," says Emma, who is not to be jested back into good humour. "Pray, what did you do last Sunday, Rawdon?"

"I went to church twice, and had cold meat for dinner," answers Rawdon, promptly. "What do we do every Sunday of our lives?"

"And in the evening? But I don't ask—it's quite immaterial to me. Thank goodness, we are both of us free agents still!"

Rawdon, not knowing very well what answer to make to this, puts his arm quietly round the heiress's waist and kisses her. Emmy's anger disperses like a mist before the sun. A heroine of her very unheroic mould, a heroine whom fate itself cannot render oblivious of the dinner-hour, is not likely to be long implacable with the lips of the man she loves upon her cheek.

"Upon my word, sir," she cries, a proper shade of indignation in her voice, "you are getting extremely free and easy in your manners, I think."

"Do you wish to quarrel with me, really, Emma? Say yes or no."

"I wish a great many things," answers Emma, with one of those little pouts which I am afraid need the adjunct of beauty to be irresistible.

"You had better tell me what they are."

"Well, in the first place I wish, as I have told you before, you wouldn't wear nasty withered bits of weed that you get, goodness knows where, in your button-hole."

And before Rawdon can defend it, his morsel of heliotrope, sweet with a sweetness other than its own, is snatched from him by his betrothed's plump fingers, and flung with a gesture of unmistakable contempt across the room.

He gets up in a moment; searches for, finds, restores the withered weed with tender care to his button-hole.

"Impertinent, of course, to ask who gave it you?" Emma remarks after a minute's silence.

"Not at all, my dear Emma," answers Rawdon, gravely, but with good temper. "Ask me anything you choose, and I will answer you; truthfully, if I can."

"Well, then, I do choose to ask you, where did you get that miserable bit of heliotrope from?"

"I got that miserable bit of heliotrope," says Rawdon, "from the prettiest girl in all Chalkshire; from the smallest, sweetest hand I ever kissed in my life."

"The prettiest *girl!*" cries Emma, relieved of her worst fears. "Little Laura Pinkney, I suppose?" Laura Pinkney is the rector's granddaughter; a child of ten, who has long been one of Rawdon's sweethearts.

"Laura Pinkney—or someone else, Emmy. These things are quite immaterial to you, you know. Thank goodness, we are both of us free agents still."

But amicable though his tone is, he walks to the window, draws up the blind, and stands there, watching the stars, instead of returning to his betrothed's side. The touch, the smell, of that bit of half-dead heliotrope have brought back so vividly to him another—alas, for Emmy—a dearer presence than hers! Rawdon watches the stars. Emma, with the kind of prescience love lends at times to the least clever people, watches the expression of his face.

"And how are your friends, those poor Theobalds, getting on?" she asks him abruptly, at last. "You see them sometimes, of course?"

"Of course," answers Rawdon, with tolerable presence of mind.

"No one is going to call. Mamma was right, as she always is in such things, in holding back when we met them at Spa. Just at first, after the flower-show, people seemed a little uncertain; indeed, everyone is quite well disposed towards him, poor man, and one can't help feeling sorry for the Miss Theobalds. Such a mistake their coming into a neighbourhood where everything was known, wasn't it?"

"An egregious mistake! By the way, what is it that is known, Emmy? I have never found out yet."

"How affected you can be when you choose, Rawdon! You know quite well that I am speaking of Mrs. Theobald's antecedents."

"Ah, Lidlington has a right to be critical on that point," says Rawdon drily. "A society of which Mrs. Conventry Brown is the leader, and Lady Rose Golightly the shining, but somewhat erratic light, has a right to inquire rigidly into antecedents—both as regards birth and conduct!"

"And the Coventry Browns so entirely disapproved of what they saw of he " goes on Emma, ignoring his remark altogether, "that evening you met them at Beaudesert (I say nothing of Lady Rose's *taste* in leaving me out of the invitation!) the Coventry Browns so entirely disapproved of her style and manner . . . . and now people say the house is full of officers, from morning till night."

"What falsehoods will people not say?" cries Rawdon, with imprudent warmth.

"If she had dressed plainly, and kept very quiet, and considering the Miss Theobalds, and everything, in time, perhaps, they might have lived their false position down. Mamma, herself, says so. But Mrs. Theobald being what she is——"

"A pretty woman, who does not dress plainly, and who has her house full of officers from morning till night, the Lidlington ladies can't find it in their hearts to forgive her," says Rawdon. "Well, I dare say that is natural enough. Emmy, my dear," a sudden, obstinate disregard of consequences taking possession of him, "I hope, by-the-by, you will give your vote to Mrs. Theobald when she is balloted for at the Lidlington croquet club?"

"When she is balloted for, yes!" says Emma calmly. "Poor thing, I am afraid she would have to search far for a proposer and seconder!"

"Not so far as you think, perhaps. Now let us—let us suppose Mrs. Theobald's name had been put up to-day; proposed by Mr. Rawdon Crosbie, seconded by the Reverend Samuel Smylie, what would you do?"

"I don't choose to suppose impossibilities," replies Miss Marsland with cold distinctness. "When you forget yourself sufficiently to commit an action so unworthy of your own dignity and of mine, it will be time enough to think of what *my* conduct should be. Let us talk on more sensible subjects if you please."

When Mrs. Crosbie returns Rawdon is still star-gazing, Miss Marsland once more counting the stitches of her lace-work. Never in this world did two engaged people look less like lovers. Mrs. Crosbie's face grows stern. "Papa says 'yes,' Emmy, dear. We have leave from Monday till Friday evening. Rawdon, if you want something to eat, you had better go to the dining-room at once. I have ordered the cold mutton to be taken in for you. You kept your father waiting ten minutes for his dinner. Have the kindness not to keep him again at prayer time."

Rawdon vanishes. But he has not very much appetite for his cold mutton.

CHAPTER XX

FRIENDS

Reader, do you know what it is, after some opera or ball, to be haunted, against wish or will of yours, by the importunate burthen of a single tune?

Rawdon Crosbie is so haunted now.

He gets up in the morning, breakfasts, prosecutes his courtship, dines, sleeps, dreams, all to the tune of *Jane*. Her face, her laugh, her trick of voice and manner are never absent from him. A dozen times a day he gives stealthy looks at the stolen silver locket. (Poor Emmy remarks that Rawdon has always the scent of those new vesuvians about him now.) He treasures jealously a morsel of flower, a "withered weed" that she has worn in her waist-belt, or that Blossy's little hand has plucked for him. The prose of his life, in short—so intensely prosaic hitherto, has become a poem:

"The light that never was on sea or land"

shines for a brief space across the dead level of his path and makes it lovely.

How will it end? How do all such hallucinations end when the tune has worn itself silent, the light died out, the poem lapsed back into dullest, tritest prose? What fate can there be in store for Rawdon Crosbie but this—that Jane, when she finds out his folly will laugh at him, and that Emma, excellent little forgiving Emma, will become his wife? Well, and in the meantime he would change places with no crowned head in Europe. The ratified blessings, the heavy responsibilities of life will rest, securely enough, no doubt, on his shoulders some day. But the "some day" has not come. And, meantime, he holds the present, the golden, stolen midsummer hours, between his hands; and Jane receives him always with a smile of welcome; and he is to meet her in London, he is to go with her to the theatre, three evenings, at least, next week! The prospect of escorting his mother and Emma to exhibitions, of family luncheons with the Herveys; even the prospective patronage of his cousin Adonis, the man Rawdon Crosbie dislikes most on the face of the earth, is not sufficient to damp him.

Sunday drags its accustomed slow length along at The Hawthorns, and Rawdon behaves himself beautifully: goes to church twice, at Emma's side, eats his cold, two o'clock dinner, at Emma's side, listens to plans for the ensuing week's pleasure with those dear Herveys, all with exemplary patience. At last comes evening; Emma must assist the maid in laying things ready—no sin in merely laying things ready—for to-morrow's packing; and Rawdon is free. He is free, goes out of doors, lights his pipe, falls at once into a reverie, and a quarter of an hour later finds himself looking over the fence which divides his father's last field from the kitchen garden of Theobalds.

He bade Jane good-bye last night, foreseeing that Sunday would be a day of serious duty at home. And still his feet have led him, who knows how? along the accustomed path. Now, what excuse must he make for his coming? Will Jane laugh at him? Will she be bored by him, Not expecting his advent, is she verifying the Lidlington gossip dealers by having her house full of officers at this moment?

He hesitates; half turns away; gives one lingering look at the grey old walls of Theobalds; then sees Jane emerging from amidst the apple trees quite close at hand, her little daughter beside her.

"Dordy, Dordy!" sings out Miss Theobald, the nearest approach her tongue can make to Rawdon's name; then runs forward, with hands of welcome outstretched. Jane follows, and unbolts the garden gate for him. He has no choi

left in the matter—does he want to have a choice?—but to stay now.

"I was not quite sure about your number in Maddox Street, Mrs. Theobald." Something in Jane's face seems to ask him the reason of his coming. "And as I was smoking my pipe in the plantations, I thought——"

"Pray don't apologise," interrupts Jane, a little coolly. "As for our number in Maddox Street, you will find it in your pocket-book. I wrote it down for you myself, last night."

"Of course you did," and Rawdon tries hard not to look as foolish as he feels. "Really, I must beg your pardon for troubling you so much. I——"

"Let me shut the gate, please; come in or out; or we shall be having the pigs in again. Did I tell you that we found your father's pigs quietly grubbing up our lettuces yesterday morning? The blessing of having near neighbours."

"We shan't be near neighbours after to-day," Rawdon remarks. "Or at least I shan't. I mean this as a kind of P.P.C. visit to Theobalds."

"How heartrending! You did mean it for a visit, then, after all? If your feelings will permit you to eat, Mr. Crosbie, perhaps you would like some of cousin James's raspberries? Blossy and I have just found out that they are getting ripe."

Jane turns, as she speaks, into a narrow side-path, Blossy following, with her tiny hand fast held in Rawdon's. The kitchen-garden of Theobalds is an exceedingly old-fashioned one, and something of the quaint home-flavour that once belonged to the word "garden" clings to it still. There are tall, ill-bearing apple trees, amidst whose branches Francis Theobald perched when he was an urchin; cucumber frames of a style of architecture of thirty years ago; beehives; narrow cinder paths leading from the main walks among the raspberry and gooseberry bushes, and even some unpretending flowers, such as marigolds, columbines, and bachelor's buttons, ranged along the outer edges of the vegetable beds.

"People may talk as they like about fine lawns and parterres," cries Jane, her mouth full of raspberries; "a kitchen-garden is much more to my taste. To see all the good old lettuces and cabbages—yes, and the very smell of the raspberries reminds one of Covent Garden."

"And is that an advantage?" asks Rawdon, for ever on the point, yet never reaching the point, of being disenchanted by Jane's want of refinement.

"Certainly it is, to a cockney like me. My jolliest hours were all spent within half-a-mile of the Covent Garden cabbage-baskets. Bloss, Miss, you have eaten enough; yes, but you have. I don't want to have you sick to-morrow. Rawdon, be good enough to take Blossy in your arms, and carry her bodily away from the raspberries. We may as well go and have another look at our magnificent garden that was to have been," she adds. "Likelier than not it will never be a garden, or a croquet-ground either, in my day. I begin—but I've no heart to finish things."

Evidently there is something amiss with Jane's spirit to-night. Rawdon—who knows nothing about the hour at which Mr. Theobald came home this morning, nor of the confession wrung from him respecting the impromptu adjournment from the barracks to Lady Rose's—Rawdon knowing nothing, I say, of Jane's domestic troubles, and self-occupied as befits the fatuity of his age, connects the change, in some mysterious manner, with himself. And his foolish heart beats quicker; and he forgets Emmy and all he owes to Emmy more and more; and every word he utters brings him nearer to the betrayal of his own ridiculous secret.

. . . When they reach the garden "that was to have been," they sit down, beneath the turf bank where the happiest hours of Rawdon Crosbie's life have already flown, and bit by bit their talk comes round to a subject not generally unpopular with boys and girls of their age, but of which, thanks to Rawdon's shyness, or to Jane's matter-of-fact good sense, this boy and girl have never spoken yet.

The hour, the solitude, a certain wistful half-sad expression on his companion's fair face, lend Rawdon inspiration. Words flow warmly, readily, from his lips, as words will now and then flow from the lips of the least eloquent men, when they chance to talk about something which they themselves feel strongly, and so for the time believe in.

"You should put all that in a book," remarks Mrs. Theobald. He has been making her some effusive speech about the impossibility of love, genuine love, losing its fire under the chilling hand of time or circumstance. "You express yourself very well, and I dare say it wouldn't look silly—in print."

"Although in real life you would call it most supremely so?" he asks her.

"I don't believe in the sort of thing at all—as far as men are concerned. I never knew I never heard, of any man being in love fo longer than six weeks at a time."

"In love!—but what do you understand b being in love? We must come to a definition o terms."

He approaches a few inches nearer; he watche her transparently clear face narrowly. It ha grown grave almost to sternness; lines that ca make you imagine what Jane will be when sh is an old woman are round her lips.

"I don't know what you mean by definition I know I don't believe in men's love and in men constancy, except in books. Why should I I'm almost twenty years old. I've lived ever day since I could run alone. What I say I s out of my own experience of the world, not o of mawkish, bread-and-butter novels."

"One may have reached twenty, and in certain sense have lived every day of one's li and yet still have something to learn," remar Rawdon Crosbie.

"Of a man that may be true. A woman of twenty knows as much of life as she will ever know, unless she is a fool, and I don't take fools into account."

Now, all this conversation, interesting no doubt from different causes to the two persons who are holding it, is profoundedly dull to Blossy's intelligence. Blossy, newly torn away from raspberry bushes, has for the first three minutes no feeling, thought, emotion, but raspberries; and sits longing for those lost delights, a fruit-stained finger between her fruit-stained lips. Then a small white moth flutters forth from a holly hedge close at hand, and Blossy's eyes and soul follow it. The moth's flight is upward. At the awful height of six or eight feet—Blossy can trace it no further against the dome of primrose sky. All she can see is a star that has newly come out overhead, and at this she gazes steadfastly for another second or two. But stars are stupid things; not eatable like raspberries, not chaseable like moths. Blossy's thoughts and eyes soon fall to earth again, and before three more minutes have fled the well-known sentiment of Dr. Watts respecting Satan and idle hands is verified.

I have said that Blossy Theobald when bent on mischief has the movements of a mouse, the fingers of a pickpocket. Like all healthy children of her age, she is a thorough bandit at heart. To conquer, destroy, possess, are the primitive instincts of Blossy's nature. And with that peach-blossom face, those heaven-blue eyes of hers, she commits her crimes so innocently! Nestling close at Rawdon's side, her soft fingers creep over his waistcoat, find their way into his waistcoat pocket, abstract its contents, before either he or Jane have noticed what she is about. Her laugh, her little trilling laugh of exultation, first arrests Jane's attention.

"Bloss, you have been at mischief! Oh, I see you, you young thief, with your fist doubled up. You've been picking Rawdon's pocket. Now, open your fingers directly."

Mechanically Rawdon Crosbie's hand goes to his waistcoat pocket. The locket that he stole in Spa, his treasure, his amulet, is gone.

"Blossy, you little sinner! Give me back my property; I'll never love you again, Blossy, if you don't. Now give it back at once."

His eagerness tells Blossy that she has got hold of something of importance, and her fingers close tighter over their prize. "Me teep him for mine own self," she remarks, in her language, nodding triumphantly at Rawdon and putting herself into an attitude of resistance.

"Give it to mamsey, Bloss," says Jane, whose system of education is not based on rigidly exact principles. "Mamsey shall keep it," holding out her hand; "and Bloss shall have twelve raspberries."

Bloss hesitates for a moment, then peeping through her fingers and finding nothing particularly seductive in the appearance of her booty, strikes the bargain. Rawdon Crosbie's secret, her own sorely missed, long hunted-for locket, is in Jane's hands.

"Mrs. Theobald, give it me! Please, give it me!" cries Rawdon, his face flaming with blushes like a guilty schoolboy's. "It is nothing—it is something I value particularly—it's of no value to anyone but me!"

This piques Jane's curiosity, of which she possesses her full woman's share. "Nothing! Something! Of no value! Of great value! I suppose I may see what kind of thing it is, at least?"

"No, please don't." In his eagerness Rawdon has seized her hand and covered it with his own. "I'll never forgive you—I mean you'll never forgive me if you see it."

The situation becomes critical. Blossy has flown back to the raspberry beds, liberally to carry out her part of the compact, and they are alone; Rawdon holding Mrs. Theobald's hand and pleading to her as if his life depended upon the prayer. "I'll never forgive *you*, sir, if you don't let go my hand." He obeys her instantly. "As to seeing, what can there be to see? Now, trust to my honour. I'll never tell Miss Marsland. I promise faithfully."

And she looks

CHAPTER XXI

"HAS THE DOLL GOT A HEART?"

There is a dead silence for a minute: a minute—an hour it seems to Rawdon Crosbie, uncertain that instant disgrace and dismissal may not await him on this discovery of his crime.

"And what put it into your head to take property that did not belong to you?" inquires Jane, coldly, at last.

"I—I don't understand you," he begins.

"Oh, come, no pretence! This locket is mine, and you took it, you know you did, the morning you left your card on us at Spa. I missed it from my box directly we got back, and accused Blossy, the nurse-girl, half the waiters in the hotel, of the theft. De Lansac and I hunted for it everywhere."

At the name of De Lansac, Rawdon begins to recover his presence of mind. "I have no wish to pretend anything, Mrs. Theobald, but I would suggest that there may—it is just possible that there may be two silver lockets in the world, each fashioned in the shape of a heart."

"But not each with a J. T. cut on the face," says Jane, holding up the locket and examining it closely. "I have had this poor little old heart since I was a girl; I should know it among a thousand. De Lansac had the initials cut for me in Paris, ages ago."

She unfastens a ribbon foom her dress, passes it through the ring of the locket, then ties it with deliberate care round her throat. "Come,"

don't let us quarrel. Don't be foolish enough to deny that you were less honest than you might have been," she remarks at last, Rawdon all this time having maintained a grim and moody silence.

"No, Mrs. Theobald, I deny nothing. If I had known the peculiar, the tender interest that attaches to that poor little old heart, you may be very sure I should have left it alone!"

"You would have done wisely," Jane answers him. "Honesty is generally the best policy. I don't know, at the same time, what I have said to you about tender or peculiar interest? The locket is mine, not yours; consequently, its rightful place is—not your pocket! Simply that."

Rawdon plucks up small tufts of grass and flings them from him disdainfully. "I agree with Dundreary," he bursts out, after a minute, "there are things no fellow can understand, and one of them is—I haven't a prejudice, I hope I haven't a prejudice belonging to me—but how Englishwomen can look—yes, can look at foreigners with the favourable eyes they do is a marvel that passes my comprehension."

"It might do that, I should say, without being much of a marvel," observes Mrs. Theobald with composure.

"But women—there's no doubt of it—judge by some standard of their own: some standard we know nothing about. That glib fluency that passes for wit, that accurate knowledge of tuckers and flounces, those graces learnt from a posture-master——"

"Don't talk so quick, pray! You'll hurt yourself. And before you go any further, would you kindly say who" (alas for Jane's cases!) "who all this fine sarcasm is directed against?"

"Against all foreigners who worm their way into Englishwomen's hearts," says Rawdon, losing his head completely.

"Do you by any chance mean De Lansac, Mr. Crosbie?"

"You know best, Mrs. Theobald. I spoke of foreigners who have wormed their way into Englishwomen's hearts. If Monsieur—if the person you mention comes, as I suppose he does, under that category, certainly I mean him."

Forth flares Jane's hot temper! up starts the angry blood upon her cheek. "And what possible interest can *you* have in the subject?" she cries. "What right have you to speak slightingly of anyone, English or foreign, who happens to be dear to me?"

"What right!" Her flushing face, her indignant voice goading him on into more absolute loss of self-command. "What right? An easy question for you to ask now! It would be more to the point to ask me what thought, what object, what interest I have left that is not wrapt up in you!"

"Mr. Crosbie!"

"Oh, it is just as well said," cries Rawdon, waxing desperate. "From the first hour I saw you, my life, and everything belonging to it, have been set adrift. And if I could choose

if I could choose and anger cools, his tone softens, in spite of himself, "I would not have it different! The gain has been greater than any loss you can inflict upon me now."

Jane, on this, turns round and looks at him full. "Well, whatever else I thought, I did not think you would be such a fool as this!" she cries with blunt, unaffected astonishment.

"I suppose not," he answers. "I suppose that's always the proper thing for women to say. Lead a man on until he makes the besotted idiot of himself I have done, and then—be surprised at his idiocy!"

"I don't understand what you mean by 'the proper thing.' Your opinions are formed, you see, on women of your own class of life, *of whom I know nothing!* If you mean that I, Jane Theobald, would lead you, or any other man, on, knowingly, into talking rubbish, you make a ridiculous mistake. Nothing bores me more than Scenes! If you had known a very little more of the world you would never have so misunderstood me."

"And you have thought I could be alone with you as I have been—for hours, for days, alone, here, with you, and not grow to care for you more than I ought?"

"Ought! Oh dear me, don't let us get upon moral stilts, in addition to everything else!" says Jane, with a laugh that cuts him horribly. "It isn't the right or the wrong of your talking so, it's the absurdity of it that takes away my breath!"

Not a very exalted standpoint, it must be allowed. And yet if Jane had planted herself upon the highest of all ground, had addressed him from the topmost pinnacle of a very Mont Blanc of virtue, Rawdon Crosbie could not have been made to feel the wrongness of his position with more galling completeness.

"The absurdity of a man of my age losing his senses under the constant influence of a face like yours!" he remarks.

"A face—a face—yes, that's all men think of!" cries Jane. "A pink and white complexion, a pair of blue doll's eyes, a stray dimple or two, are excuse enough for anything. Has the doll got a heart? Oh, not worth the loss of time to guess at that! And as women go—as women go," she adds, a little bitterly, "men are right, I dare say, in their way of judging them."

Something in the tone of her voice softens Rawdon's [illegible] more and more. "And you?" he asks [illegible] Mrs. Theobald? Is it loss of time to [illegible]ate if you have a heart, I wonder?"

She turns pale: he can see the change of hue even in that indistinct light; she flushes, rosy red. After a minute: "From most men," she exclaims, "from most men I should just call a question like that balderdash—the kind of stuff that passes current, with weak lemonade, between the dances at a ball! With you, I am sure I don't know why, I can talk differently to how I ever talked before. I like you. There's

the truth. I liked you, from the first, for your pluck in standing up for me and coming to see me, in spite of your sweetheart and your mamma. I like you because you are good to Blossy. I like you for everything!"

Rawdon Crosbie heaves a miserable sigh. He knows, too well he knows, what these candid admissions must herald.

"And so I'll say to you what I'm sure I never thought to have said to anyone while I lived. I *have* a heart . . . and it's full." As she says this, each word seems to be wrung from her lips with an effort. "Fuller than it can hold . . . the worse for me, perhaps, already."

She has made him the confession for his good; honestly, frankly, to cure him of his folly. And the result is the direst failure that ever honest truth-telling brought about. Till now, Rawdon's feelings have been—he himself could not have told you what. A compound of admiration for Jane's beauty, of boyish vanity, of generous revolt against the treatment she has met with at the hands of Emma and his mother. In his new-born passionate jealousy, a flood, no longer of vague sentiment, but of love—the word must be written—love, strong in very proportion to its hopelessness, goes forth from his heart towards this woman who has faltered out her hapless secret to him alone here, under the starlight, in the fragrant night. Ah, he sees everything with fatal clearness now! He knows what premonition, acuter than reason, made him hate De Lansac from the first.

"So I hope you will believe me, when I repeat that I never led you, or anyone else, on, knowingly," says Jane, a kind of shyness, very unusual with her, in her manner.

"Believe you, Mrs. Theobald? I believe only too easily," he answers. "If I had chosen to keep my eyes open, I might have seen from the first what was in store for me."

"But it's all over now, Rawdon. You have forgotten to be wise for a moment, as we all do sometimes, but I am your friend and comrade the same as ever. I only hope," she goes on—"I only hope that in the future you will be made as happy by Miss Marsland as I wish you to be."

"The future—don't talk to me of the future!" Rawdon interrupts. "How, in God's name, can I be happy away——"

"Away from a woman who does not care for you," says Jane, with kindly, cruel firmness, "and with one who does? Ah, you will learn how in time, my dear boy!"

"I may learn many things," says Rawdon, slowly and with emphasis. "I shall never learn to forget you, and all the hours I have spent with you."

And he rises and walks away along the path by which they came, Jane following him in silence.

"I suppose it will be better for me not to come and see you any more," he remarks, when they have reached the garden gate.

"I suppose so," says Jane, not without a falter in her voice.

"Not this week that you will be in London, of course. Well, then, I may as well say good-bye to you now."

"Good-bye, Rawdon."

He takes her hand, holds it for a moment with a grip of iron in his own, then goes, without another word.

"Dordy, Dordy!" cries Blossy from among the raspberry bushes, amazed at seeing her playmate leave without his accustomed kiss.

But Rawdon never turns his head; straight onward, towards home, towards Emma, towards duty—he marches, nor looks behind him more.

He must never—in this moment's exceeding bitterness—he tells himself, he must never look back more. The light has gone suddenly out, the tune stopped; the one chapter worth reading in his life's dull book is shut, "clasped with a clasp," and there is an end of it! He must never look back more.

And he looks back, before he has gone a doz steps, and with jealous eyes watches the figures of Jane and of her child until the falling shadows hide them away out of his sight.

CHAPTER XXII

AMONG "THE PROFESSIO

It is curious how many old friends we are sure to encounter when we have come lately into money; curious how well everybody remembers our face, how eager everybody seems to be to renew the pleasure of our acquaintance.

Before Mr. Theobald has been twenty-four hours in town he has made half-a-dozen engagements. After congratulating a man upon a crusty cousin's demise, what can come more naturally to the lips than to ask him to dinner? He must run down and mess with his old regiment at Aldershot; must dine at the Rag, and have a little quiet play afterwards, with Lord Barty Beaudesert; must join a jovial "literary" party, given by the friend of his youth, Jack Thornton, at Richmond. Quite easily, and without an effort, Francis Theobald, actually possessed of six hundred, and ready to spend at the rate of six thousand a year, finds himself drawn towards the world, the associates that knew and ruined him in his palmy days. And equally without an effort does his wife gravitate back towards hers—the world, the associates of that painfully ungenteel period when Jane wore shabby boots and a darned merino frock—the world that was so all-sufficient for her before her marriage brought her within the possible reach of people who visit and are visited!

Not a creature but who is in or connected with the profession does Jane know in London: Uncle Dick, "the person who plays the trombone in an orchestra;" Uncle Dick's wife, once—

an actress whom the town ran after, wardrobe-keeper now at one of the minor theatres; Miss Minnie Arundel (*née* Mary Johnson); and their friends. And oh, how happy, how thoroughly, vulgarly happy, Jane is among them all! She goes with Miss Arundel to rehearsal; she sups on the humble fare, the cold roast pork and pickles of old days, at Mr. Richard Johnson's, and, while Uncle Dick sips his gin-and-water, listens to his wife's stories of how Juliet Montmorenci will not wear such a dress in the forthcoming piece, and how Carlotta de Vere insists upon wearing such another, and how that artful Aurora Stanley, a favourite of the author's, has got her part written up expressly to admit of a pink satin train, since last rehearsal. And then the pleasure of exhibiting Blossy before all these people, the pleasure of seeing Blossy hugged, of hearing herself called "my dear" by every kindly, albeit out-at-elbows, soul she meets within theatrical precincts!

We can none of us—let the Mrs. Coventry Browns of the earth look to the fact—be much more exalted, much more refined, than our earliest associations. Jane feels a glow of pride in keeping so completely on a level, still, with hers. Mrs. Crosbie, the Miss Theobalds, every person and thing connected with Chalkshire Philistinism, cease as utterly to trouble her conscience during these few happy days as though she had never known the blessings of Chalkshire or of Philistinism at all. She almost forgets her new-born distrust of Theobald and Lady Rose. She entirely forgets poor young Rawdon's confession of Sunday evening, and his present banishment.

Is not that the way with most of us, Reader? A. and B. like each other, quarrel, part; and to-morrow A. is philandering, unconcerned, among other scenes and people, and B. debating, frenzied, between a revolver and prussic acid. Admirable provision of nature, that the balance of suffering should be so nicely adjusted!

Rawdon Crosbie does not quite hover 'twixt bowl and dagger yet; but he really does hesitate between emigrating to a sheep farm in South America and insisting that Emma Marsland shall marry him in three days. Some kind of action, desperate and immediate, it seems to him he must have, to fill the blank that Jane has left in his existence. Oh, the dreary sight-seeing with his affianced! Oh, the pictures at the Royal Academy, the family luncheons with those dear Herveys! Oh, the intolerable pain and burthen and weariness of everything!

He struggles on for three whole days, submitting, rebelling, growing worse in every way, hourly. On the afternoon of the fourth, Thursday, can bear up no longer, and finds himself knocking at the door of the Theobalds' lodgings in Maddox Street.

"Yes, Mrs. Theobald is at home, and will see him." So the servant girl who has taken in his card brings him word. He enters, walks up the stairs, with the sensation, stout young fellow though he is, of his legs trembling under him, and finds Jane, in her walking dress, just ready to go out; finds her blooming, in excellent spirits, cordial.

"I was afraid—I didn't know whether you would admit me—I *couldn't* keep away any longer," he explains, lucidly, as he held her hand in his.

Jane is simply taken aback by the change on the lad's face. Rawdon Crosbie looks older by a dozen years than when she saw him last in the garden at Theobalds. He has lost flesh, in the quick way some people do under any wear and tear of the spirit; his eyes have grown hollow; in the excitement of seeing Jane again his sunburnt cheeks turn to a kind of sickly greenish yellow. Not, I must say, in beauty has Rawdon gained under the influence of the tender passion, and still, so pitifully inclined are women's hearts, he has acquired interest no good looks could have lent him in Jane's sight. She likes the poor boy as she never did before at this moment, is sorry for him, feels a pang or two of remorse even, as she reflects upon her own amusements, and the heartless way in which she has forgotten, not only his possible sufferings, but his very existence during the past four days.

"Of course you couldn't keep away. Why should you? You banished yourself, remember. I only ventured a mild 'yes' when you swore you would never come and see me again. You find me all alone, Rawdon," and now she takes her hand from his, and widens the space between them. "Theobald is out and Blossy has been seized upon bodily, and carried off to my Uncle Dick's till to-morrow."

Rawdon makes no reply. He stands upright as a ramrod, and looking—poor young fool that he is—into her fair untroubled face with the kind of hungry look we give to anything we love overmuch after long separation. Long separation! and it is only since Sunday that he has been parted from her! Only four days. And his life, thirty or forty years, is to be so parted. And he will have to live through it all. The myriad-tongued roar of Regent Street ebbs and swells. The sun is shining cheerfully through the open window, as it is shining, we may be sure, on many a pair of happy lovers, on many a dead face, throughout the length and breadth of London. Down in the street an organ-grinder, ignorantly ironical, is playing the same Grande Duchesse waltzes to which they first danced together in Spa . . . all the world, in short, going on as it usually goes towards four o'clock of a summer's afternoon, and one perfectly insignificant gunner-boy acting his little part in the great drama, and believing that no one ever felt, suffered, despaired, as he does at this moment!

"If you had been five minutes later you would have missed me," says Jane, in her bright voice. "I am just going round to the Royal for Min. Did I tell you Uncle Dick has got her an engagement there for the new extravaganza? Such a start for her, poor old Min! Thirty shillings a week, and the prospect of a leading part after

Christmas. Are you free for an hour? If you are, you may walk to the Royal with me. I should like you and Min to see what you can make of each other."

Rawdon is tacitly engaged—is under orders, that is to say, to dine with his mother and Emma at six o'clock, and to go with them and the Herveys afterwards to the theatre. So he answers unhesitatingly that he is free, and ready—ready? heavens! how weak on some occasions, is human language!—to accompany Mrs. Theobald wherever she chooses.

"I suppose you are not disengaged for the evening as well?" Jane goes on. "No use to ask you though. Nobody is ever disengaged at the eleventh hour in London."

"But I don't belong to London," says Rawdon. "I came up from Woolwich an hour ago, intending, I am sure I don't know why, to stay till to-morrow morning, and I have no engagements of any kind . . . that can't be broken."

"And none that you mind breaking? Then, I'll tell you what you may do. Min is not acting to night: it's a benefit, and she doesn't appear; and so, at her own request, I'm going with her to the Prince of Wales's to see 'School.' That's the way with all us actresses." It pleases Jane thus to enrol herself among the profession to which, in fact, she never belonged. "We get a holiday from our own hot theatre for one night, and the greatest pleasure we can have is to go to another hot theatre, to see another actress act. Now, would you like to go with us?"

"Would I like it!" cries Rawdon, flushing up with sudden animation.

"I can give you a place. We have an order for the stalls, and, of course, at the last moment, Theobald has played us false. So Min is going to stay with me till to-morrow. You and she will fraternise finely, Rawdon, or if you don't it will be your fault: Min's sure to take to you, because you are in the army. She takes to all men who are in the army. Min wouldn't give a thank-you to go anywhere with a London clerk, or anything of that kind, the people she calls cads; and as to an actor!—— But we mustn't stay chattering here," Jane interrupts herself, looking at her watch. "Half-past three, already? Then we have no time to lose; rehearsal is over at four, and I promised Min faithfully to be at the theatre to meet her."

She rises, walks up to the glass above the chimney-piece, and pins on a lilliputian strip of spotted net across her face. "Theobald always tells me to wear a veil when I go out alone in London. As if I wanted anything or any person to protect me! I, who knew every turning and corner from Piccadilly to St. Paul's by the time I was eight years old. Good gracious, my dear boy!" Rawdon has followed her, and again set up the lachrymose gaze at her face. "What are you looking at so? What do you want? You make me quite nervous."

"Mrs. Theobald," says the poor wretch, "I want to know if you have forgiven me. I give you my honour, I've thought of nothing, night or day since, but your anger. Can you forgive me? Can you ever feel the same to me as you felt before my rudeness—my stupidity, on Sunday evening?"

Now, there can be no doubt that a discreet woman of the world—a Loo Childers, a Lady Rose Golightly—would know how to act in such a position as this with exact propriety; would manage, while teaching a too pertinacious lover to keep within due bounds, so to temper the lesson as to leave a glimmering blue line of hope before his mind's horizon. Unversed in the discriminating tactics of fine breeding, outspoken, whether for good or for evil, Theobald does nothing of the kind. "If I hadn't 'forgiven' you, as you call it, I don't suppose I should have told the girl to let you in. Why in the world should I not feel the same to you as ever? You know I never thought a great deal of your wisdom, at the best of times."

"And never cared a great deal about my society. Pray, say it out."

"After the fashion you mean, *never*, my dear child, and never should, if I saw you every day for twenty years. I thought I explained all that to you plain enough on Sunday? Now, hold my parasol, please. I can put on my gloves as we go out. And take my advice," adds Jane, looking with her frank eyes into his face, "don't go trying anything in the Romeo and Juliet line before Min. You won't forget it in a hurry if you do, I can tell you."

They walk leisurely down the shady side of Regent Street, Jane's hand on Rawdon Crosbie's arm. It is the most stirring hour of the afternoon, and London, during these last days of one of the shortest, gayest seasons on record, is crammed. What strings of carriages; what high-stepping horses; what towering bonnets; what golden chignons!—what an affluence of that poor man's bread which well-intentioned people rail out against as wicked luxury! Among the motley crowd, will fate confront them with Mrs. Hervey and his mother, in their jointly hired sham-private brougham? young Rawdon speculates; not without some cowardly trepidation at the possibility, remote though it be.

No such untoward accident befalls them just at present, but in walking along from Maddox Street to Drury Lane, Rawdon comes across more than one of his brothers-in-arms from Woolwich; and the admiring glances bestowed by each young warrior upon the pretty woman at his side go a long way towards repaying him for his unhappiness of the last four days. He is no more in reality to Mrs. Theobald than the handle of her parasol; this he knows: but Jones of the Engineers, and Brown of the Artillery, do not know it. And blighted though Rawdon's state may be, it is not so bad as to be quite beyond the alleviations gratified vanity can offer.

They reach the stage entrance of the Royal, and are admitted unquestioned by the doorkeeper. Jane stops for a minute's affectionate

chat with a little old threadbare gentleman, who happens to be leaving the theatre just as they enter—the very old Adolphe Dido who taught her to dance when she was a child. Then, quitting Rawdon's arm, she pushes open a double red baize door, and leads the way along a passage and down some steps, to lighten whose obscurity, even at this blazing hour of the summer day, a half-turned jet of gas is necessary. Another moment, and they are in the midst of that atmosphere of carpentry, paint, and stale gas, those regions of canvas, trap-doors, and weird-looking stage machinery, which to Jane are the most familiar and cheerful surroundings the world can afford.

The rehearsal of the extravaganza is still going on, and to Rawdon's unprofessional eyes a pale and funereal piece of business it seems, with the yawning back-ground of empty house, the orchestra playing just and only just sufficiently loud to mark the time, the middle-aged heroine, the pathetically prosaic crowd of girls, who are to shine forth as fairies, in tinsel and arsenic-green, under the witching influence of lime-light. "I'm glad we are in time for the finish," Jane whispers to him, as they pause in an unoccupied corner of the stage. "You'll see Min directly —yes, there she is, on the prompt side, in a lilac dress and pink bonnet. Now, mind, I expect you to lose your heart to her on the spot."

Rawdon's eyes have to grow accustomed to the dusky light around before he can discern any of the people on the stage with clearness, and then—then he certainly does not lose his heart to Miss Minnie Arundel. She is like her sister, but without a tithe of Jane's grace and originality; she is Jane vulgarised. A bright-expressioned yet faded-looking little woman of five or six-and-twenty, with brown hair cut in a line across her forehead, fine stage eyes, marred somewhat for daylight use by the ineffaceable traces of bismuth beneath the lower lids, an expressive large mouth, and shapely white teeth, of which, whether before or behind the footlights, she makes the most: such is Miss Minnie Arundel.

Rawdon does not lose his heart, perhaps because he has not above an inch of that organ left to lose, but he feels himself drawn towards the smiling face of the poor little humble actress as if by magic. Her bonnet is too showy a pink, and her dress too showy a lilac; and her mouth is too large, and her cheeks have been too long familiar with red paint and pearl powder to have any more natural bloom left than those of a ball-going young lady after four or five London seasons. But, taken altogether, poor Min's is a good face, fresher, in one sense, than Lady Rose's or Loo Childers'. She speaks, having come forward in the very unimportant part assigned to her in the piece; her voice is sympathetic, the same kind of clear tuneful organ as Jane's, and Rawdon's predilection for her is complete.

"And that is my Uncle Dick," said Mrs. Theobald, when Rawdon has sounded as many notes of praise as he can compass on the score of Miss Arundel's charms. "Isn't he a dear old fellow? You are looking in the wrong direction; musician number three in the orchestra, just behind the author. There he is wiping his trombone at this moment."

Musician number three is wiping his trombone, then his forehead, with a blue pocket handkerchief, large enough for a moderate sized mainsail, and relieved by orange spots. Honest, worthy Uncle Dick—with that shining, warm face of his (that has something of Jane in its expression), and that greasy coat-collar, and that blue and orange pocket handkerchief! If there were no Francis Theobald, no Emma Marsland in the world Rawdon Crosbie would give every terrestrial possession for the hope of calling Jane "wife." But it does occur to him strongly, that he would rather Francis Theobald than himself should have the privilege of calling musician number three "Uncle."

"He took Min and me when we were little," says Jane, as though she divined his thoughts, "took us, when he had work enough to do to get bread for himself, and brought us bot up for the stage. Our father was killed by the fall of a lift; he was a scene-painter . . . did I ever tell you the family history?—and mother was dying of consumption, and then Uncle Dick came to the front, and paid—God knows how—for everything she wanted, and took us home when she was buried. I know he doesn't come within a hundred miles of what you or Theobald would call a gentleman, poor old fellow; and I know if he was a soberer man it would be all the better for himself. But if ever I get to heaven," says Jane, warming, "it will be a very poor place to me—I've told Theobald so, often—unless Uncle Dick gets there too; yes, and is thought good and refined enough, every way, for general society."

The sentiment is not expressed in particularly orthodox language, but the moisture in Mrs. Theobald's blue eyes shows how much she is in earnest. Rawdon asks, penitentially, to be introduced to Mr. Richard Johnson.

"Not to-day," says Jane, nodding to Uncle Dick, as, the rehearsal over, the musicians scuttle, like mice, through the orchestra door. "Nothing puts the dear old soul out more than to bother him when he is sleepy after rehearsal. Some evening, when we are in town next, I'll take you to his house to supper, perhaps—unless you get married meantime. Now come, and I'll introduce you to Min, and we can settle about to-night."

Miss Minnie Arundel and Rawdon fraternise, as Jane predicted, at once. A young fellow of two-and-twenty who could not fraternise with Minnie Arundel must be a very great philosopher or a very desperate fool indeed; perhaps both. She is sure she remembers his face down at Aldershot. Crosbie—in the Blues, is he not? Oh, Artillery. Well, at all events, she acted once with some Crosbie—or Crofton, was it?—in some regiment or other, and he was about Rawdon's height. She is certain, raising her

dark eyes to his face, Rawdon would act beautifully in tender, sentimental parts. Would he like some lessons from her? Very much indeed. What a pity she has no time to give him any just at present!

"If you chaff the poor child like that you'll frighten him away at once, Min," says Jane, gravely. "He is not used to it. Rawdon belongs to a very serious family indeed."

"Then how comes Rawdon to be running about with you, Jenny dear?" asks the actress.

They issue forth from the theatre together, and proceed, all three, in the direction of Jane's lodgings. Miss Arundel, as I mentioned, is clad in most of the colours of the rainbow; the nameless untidiness of her dress, the freedom of her demeanour, her short cut hair, her bismuthed eyes, all speak in plainest language to what profession, and to what lowly rank of the profession, she belongs. Now would be the time for the jointly-hired Hervey-Crosbie brougham, with its grand mock-private coachman, to pass along! The awful vision of such an encounter darts, unbidden, across Rawdon's brain, and with it the recollection that at this very moment he should be at number one-hundred-and-five, Bolton Row, apparelled in black suit and white cravat for a family entertainment.

"You will dine with us at six," wrote Emma, in her little love-despatch of orders, "and we will go to whatever theatre Major Hervey takes a box for afterwards. But come as much sooner as you like. I shall dress early."

And here he is, sauntering cheerfully along at the side of Miss Arundel and Jane, through Leicester Square, just as though time and liberty were his own possessions still! He takes out his watch with a sudden twinge of conscience, as the wording of Emma's note recurs to his mind, and discovers that is is already half-past five.

"If you want to run away, run," says Miss Minnie Arundel, as if she were speaking to a child of six. "Little boys need never take out their watches twice in my society."

Rawdon explains, addressing Mrs. Theobald, for he is afraid of the lurking mockery in Min's black eyes, that he has an engagement—an unimportant one, but from which he must needs free himself before he goes away to his hotel to dress.

"I thought you told me, an hour ago, that you had no engagement at all?" Jane remarks.

"No engagement that could not be broken," answers Rawdon Crosbie.

"All engagements can be broken, if one has moral courage—moral courage, and sufficient means to pay the forfeit-money," says the actress, whose turn of mind sharp contact with the world has rendered commercial.

"Moral courage and sufficient means to pay the forfeit-money." Rawdon hails a hansom, promising to call by half-past seven at Jane's lodgings; and as he rattles quickly along towards Bolton Row he ponders long and deeply over the practical wisdom contained in Miss Minnie Arundel's remark.

CHAPTER XXIII

THOSE DEAR HERVEYS

For he can no longer hide from himself in what position he stands. If he did not realise the truth before, this sweetness of reconciliation, this hour and a half spent at Jane's side, have brought him to see it in its very nakedness at last. As much mad passionate devotion as his nature is capable of, he, Emma Marsland's lover, is lavishing upon a woman the tips of whose fingers he will never be allowed to kiss while he lives. Now, what does honour at a pass like this bid him do?

"All engagements may be broken, if one has moral courage — moral courage, and means sufficient to pay the forfeit-money."

Has he such moral courage and such means? Courage to break the heart of a good and amiable girl who, until she became his betrothed wife, was his sister and best friend; means to pay the forfeit (not the loss of Emma's fortune, let me do Rawdon justice, this is the lightest of his considerations): the forfeit of self-respect, of credit before his own family and before the world, which breach of faith so flagrant must entail?

Well, then, shall he tell the truth, the absolute, honourable, ridiculous truth, and let Emma deal with the future of both as she chooses? "I thought I loved you, my dear Emma," such a confession must run. "I was sure, at all events, that it was my mamma's wish we should marry; and as you have thirty thousand pounds, and as I knew that you had long ago bestowed your affections upon me, I proposed. And on the day you accepted me, my dear, I fell in love with someone else—needless, I believe, to mention her name—and have been stealthily seeing her and falling deeper and deeper in love ever since. She laughs in my face; was good enough, a few days ago, to tell me that her heart was not in her own keeping, and I think this has had the effect of rendering my passion for her a little the stronger. The possession of a torn glove, of a faded flower that she has worn, renders me happier than would the gift, my dear Emma, of your hand and of all the substantial blessings your hand would bring with it. However, as I am trying to act like a man of honour, you see, I tell you the truth. Do with me, decide for me, as you think best."

If he said this to Emma Marsland—nay, if he embodied the spirit of this in terms of the nicest circumlocution and delicacy—he would be a brute; and if he continues to tread the path wherein he finds himself at present, he will be a scoundrel. And . . . the cab turns with a jerk round the corner by Devonshire House into Bolton Row, just at this point of his meditations . . . and what the dickens, thinks Rawdon, descending suddenly from theory to practice, what the dickens can he say, short of absolute falsehood, that shall account to poor Emmy for his desertion of the family dinner-party and the family theatre-going to-night?

He stops at number one-hundred-and-five, and, bidding the cabman wait for him, runs up the steps and gives a knock, whose loudness and decision are in a direct inverse ratio to his actual frame of mind. Number one-hundred-and-five, Bolton Row, is a lodging-house, but a lodging-house of the most private and elegant kind; the master of which, Mr. Maurice, after two o'clock in the day, transforms himself into a stately and imposing-looking family butler. Mr. Maurice has been in the confidence of the Hervey family during the last half-century: needless to say that he knows all about the impending marriage between Rawdon Crosbie and Miss Marsland. "I am to discharge the cab, Mr. Rawdon?" This with a glance at Rawdon's morning coat, as Mr. Maurice, dignified and in full dress, stands on the summit of his own doorsteps.

"No," answers Rawdon, shortly; "the cab will wait. My mother is at home, Maurice?"

"The ladies are in the drawing-room, dressed for dinner, sir."

And up the stairs walks Maurice, a model of all the respectabilities, in his patent shoes and black suit; Mr. Rawdon, in his disreputable Oxford mixture, and with conscience to match, following.

He is ushered into the drawing-room, and for a moment sees neither Emma nor Mrs. Crosbie; sees only towering pyramids of silver-grey moiré, held aloft by a much grander-looking young gentleman than himself, whose insigma of office, a yard measure, lies, with laces, ribbons, and other adjuncts of female dress, on an adjacent table.

"Rawdon, at last," says Mrs. Crosbie, advancing, and giving her son three fingers, but too engrossed in the thrilling perplexities of millinery to notice whether he is in orthodox sables or not. "Take care where you step, Rawdon. You find us in the middle of a most important matter. Yes," addressing herself to the shopman, "I am *almost* sure the moiré is not the right shade. I am thankful I saw it at home before having it cut. At a little distance it might be taken for dirty white. Emma, my dear, you are nearest to Mrs. Hervey; ask if she does not think the dress, especially for the occasion, will have too much the appearance of dirty white?"

Emma, who is looking rather less attractive than usual, in ribbons of the wrong colour, stoops, on this, to a very handsome, very deaf old lady in an arm-chair, and shouts out the desired question: "Does Mrs. Hervey not think, when the moiré is made up, and considering the occasion it is wanted for"—here a meaning smile is furtively addressed by poor Emmy to Rawdon—"that it will have rather too much the look of a dirty white?"

"Considering what occasion?" says the old lady, raising her eyelids about the eighth of an inch. "Lower your voice, my dear Miss Marsland, and I shall understand; I never can hear when people speak so loud."

Old Mrs. Hervey is one of the most marvellous specimens of antique beauty ever seen. She is a Hervey by blood—it is an hereditary custom among this people to intermarry—and has the typical family face. A delicate, longish nose, that, if it only stood out sufficiently, would be a noble one; a mouth whose thin lips, even in extreme old age, keep their high-bred, scornful curves; a complexion of marble, discoloured merely, not seamed, by age; eyebrows elevated, as though in pity of the rest of the world for not being Herveys; long-cut eyes, cold and black as jet, and the "Hervey eyelids." Her dress is of pearl-coloured satin; Elizabethan ruffles of softest lace are round her throat, and unwrinkled jewelled old hands; above her forehead ascends such a structure of snow-white hair—the most expensive colour in the world, by the way—and yellowish Mechlin as Vandyke would have loved to paint. A marvellous specimen of antique beauty, preserved as only the antiseptic virtues of a cold heart could preserve any creature for more than seventy years, and likely to last another decade or so with ease.

What shall kill a woman who has been strong enough to outlive youth and love, joy and sorrow, all hopes, and all regrets? The friends and lovers of Mrs. Hervey's youth, her husband, her blooming sons and daughters (of whom only one wreck remains), all these were gone from her, hushed in the mould, long ages ago. And Mrs. Hervey not only lives on, but enjoys life; think of that, reader, of twenty-five—enjoys life still! divides her time between Bath, Cheltenham, and London; plays short whist with just as wholesome a gusto as erewhile she played long; goes to the theatres of the day to see French actresses and English breakdowns, as once she went to see Siddons and Kemble in their prime; lives in the world, and keeps the world's pace still. A wise old philosopher, who conquers time by accommodating herself to time's changes—just that. This gift of long living would probably, if we understood it better, turn out to be only the gift of superior pliability. Mrs. Hervey has seen all fashions, in manners, art, dress, morals, and has conformed herself to each in its turn. When she was born, George the Third and good Queen Charlotte had long been holding their model court of dull decorum and strictest domestic fidelity. Her early youth was spent under the influence of the regency! Then, by the time she was middle-aged, had come a turn in the kaleidoscope, and the bits of glass were back in the old George the Third or courtly domestic pattern. And now, here we all are wearing high heels to our shoes again; and requiring high-rouged pleasures; and abjuring domesticity; and going, by way of æsthetic entertainment, so see Mademoiselle Boulotte!

Mrs. Hervey has known virtue to be in vogue and vice at a discount, and again vice regnant and virtue nowhere, not once, but a good many times during her life; the change recurring, indeed, almost with as periodic a regularity as large bonnets and small ones. And she has

been a citizeness of the world, loyally following the world's current always.

At her request a box has been taken for the French plays to-night.

"Boulotte is really an amusing creature," says Mrs. Hervey; "and as the play is in another language we need understand no more about her than we think fit. We are sure of a better audience there than at any theatre in town; all the best people go to have a look at Boulotte, and a good audience is what a little country mouse like Miss Marsland should be taken to see."

It is some minutes before Rawdon, nervously watching the clock upon the mantelpiece, can get a chance of speaking. The silver-grey moiré—so a whisper from Emma informs him—is to be "mamma's wedding dress—I mean the dress worn by mamma at our wedding." And, having firmly resolved to become the possessor of this moiré, Mrs. Crosbie rings every disparaging change that she can think of with respect to it into the ears of the long-suffering silken-tongued shopman. It will certainly look too much like dirty white for a bridal occasion. The water is not large enough. Every here and there—yes, but Mrs. Crosbie is certain of it—every here and there you can see a *decided unevenness* in the cord. Emma joins in chorus. The silken-tongued shopman explains; the ladies return to the charge; retire; make a feint of withdrawing wholly from the bargain; at last get the dress, "as it is the close of the season, not from any flaw in the article," for two guineas less than its original price. And then come the ribbons and the laces, and the trimmings, all of which must be had at close-of-the-season prices, too.

Sick, and disgusted at heart, boiling over with impatience he dare not show, young Rawdon listens. Oh, the paltriness, he thinks, the vulgarity, the sordid smallness of all this huckstering! Unless women wish to make the men to whom they belong despise them utterly, never should they suffer them to be present at these sorts of commercial transactions. Why Helen herself would have lost half her lovers could her lovers have heard her haggling, an hour at a time, with a smirking man-milliner, over silk dresses and ribbons! But then men-milliners belong to such a much more advanced stage of civilisation than Helen's!

At last it is over. The grandly-dressed young gentleman gathers up his remaining wares, and bows himself backwards from the room. And Rawdon, lashed by this time into a very fever of impatience, may speak.

"I'm extremely sorry, Emma, but your note did not come soon enough. I am engaged for to-night."

"Engaged!" cries Emma, dismally. "Oh, Rawdon, how horrid of you! Oh, mamma, what shall we do?"

"Thirteen guineas for fifteen yards and a half," says Mrs. Crosbie, holding the dress between her shapely fingers, and looking up dreamily at the ceiling: "that comes to less than eighteen shillings a yard. There can be no doubt of it, Emmy, silks are to be got cheaper in Tottenham Court Road than at the West-end shops. And if one has the *credit* of always dealing at Howell and James's," adds Mrs. Crosbie, "who can say where any particular thing comes from? Rawdon, I trust you admire the dress in which I mean to do honour to a certain great occasion?"

"I don't know which to admire most, mother," answers Rawdon, "the dress, or the principles of economy you displayed in buying it. I hope the bridecake and favours are to be bargained for in the same praiseworthy spirit?"

The bridecake and favours! Yes; his projects of truth-telling, of paying forfeit, should honour bid him do so, have come to this already. Chafed in temper, wearied in spirit, though Rawdon Crosbie may be, the sight, the very rustle of these wedding garments, seem (boy that he is still at heart) to have irrevocably sealed his doom! Half an hour ago reprieve might have been possible. He can hear "never, never," sounding from every fold of the grey moiré, held, like the web of fate, between his mother's hands. . . . The more reason, thinks Rawdon, with another glance at the clock, to make the most of this dwindling span of liberty that is still his; of this evening, this whole, intoxicating, unlawful, most delightful evening, from half-past seven till twelve, that he is to pass at Jane's side!

There is silence after his little question about the bridecake and favours; silence relieved after a few moments by a deprecating "ahem" from behind Mrs. Hervey's easy chair.

"After the breaking off of Miss Copplestone's marriage," says a Hervey voice—"after the breaking off of Adelina Copplestone's marriage with the Hon. Charles Gascoigne, I remember the cake was put up for sale in the window of the chief confectioner at Harrowgate. It was thought rather bad taste on the part of the Copplestone family; still, as dear old Lady Copplestone said, 'What is the use of a wedding-cake except at a wedding?' And a doctor, or a solicitor, or some such person eventually bought it, at cost price, on the occasion of his daughter's marriage."

Old Mrs. Hervey opens her eyes, which have been closed ever since she gave her final opinion on the silver-grey moiré.

"What in the world are you talking about, Maria? You speak more unintelligibly every day. Repeat your observation, pray, and distinctly. It drives me distracted to hear people mumbling their words, as if they were ashamed of them."

Upon this the narrative has to be repeated, vociferated, syllable by syllable into the old lady's ear.

"Who are the Copplestones, and where is the point?" is her chilling commentary. "Don't get into the habit of telling pointless stories, my

good Maria. Life is quite tedious enough already, without that."

"My good Maria" is old Mrs. Hervey's unpaid white slave, or companion, and another Hervey. She is a young lady of dim and shadowy age, who, until a few years ago, haunted the ball-room walls of one of our inland watering towns with mournful tenacity, and from whose heart a solitary matrimonial hope has not yet fled. Tall, and waspish of figure, acid of expression, sallow with the sallownes engendered by a life to which exercise and fresh air are alike unknown, my good Maria has certainly not her share of the family looks. She will tell you confidently that she had eyelashes, complexion, animation once; but adds, with pathetic truthfulness, that she lost them all—after measles. And old Mrs. Hervey will not allow her to patch up deficiencies by art. "In our position, my good Maria, the less we try to attract the attention of others, the better taste we shall show." As a consequence, Maria's face is like her whole, flat, disappointed, colourless existence —a blank.

She is the most useful Companion to Polite Society, or Addenda to the Peerage extant; old Mrs. Hervey knows that no money could ever refill her good Maria's place, did she lose her: has the nobility by heart, and is a positive new edition, with notes of "The Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland." "Who's Who?" is no mystery to Maria Hervey. She can tell you to a nicety where everybody was born, and where their grandfather was buried, and the exact date when plebeian blood from the veins of a "solicitor or doctor, or some such person," first made its way into the family. Especially are the marriages and burials of defunct Herveys her glory and delight. With her own fair fingers she has drawn out a miraculously minute and widespreading genealogical record, showing forth all the noble families who, from the time of Edward the Sixth downwards, have contracted alliances with her ancestors. She etches little pen-and-ink bits of architecture on card (mostly constructed on the principle of the famous leaning towers of Bologna), and presents them to strangers, as the tombs or birthplaces of the Herveys. She knows English history well, in as far as it forms a frame-work or back-ground to Hervey existence; can tell you accurately at what siege one of her forefathers devoured his own leathern doublet, and at what battle another, both arms shot away, managed to get his bridle round his neck, and thrice shouting "*Pour y parvenir!*" the family motto, rushed on, followed by every Hervey on the field, to a glorious martyrdom.

"An invaluable dictionary of reference, though somewhat badly bound," Mrs. Hervey says of her in her pleasant, cruel way. To be ill-favoured in person is, in the old lady's eyes, the worst crime a woman and a Hervey can commit. "If my good Maria married, it would positively take a library to replace her. Happily, there is little chance of that."

Between Maria and Rawdon Crosbie there has long existed bitter blood; on Maria's side at least. When Rawdon was a small boy he once sent Miss Hervey a valentine, drawn by himself, in which occurred a richly illuminated device of a Hervey swimming towards the ark after the Deluge, with the family pedigree between his teeth. And Maria never could get over the affront. She spits forth a little mild venom at him now.

"Rawdon spoke of bargaining for the bride-cake and favours, ma'am. I mentioned the Copplestones, to show that there may be extraordinary instances of such things going cheap. Adelina Copplestone was an heiress," adds Maria, with spiteful retrospection, "and changed her mind about the Hon. Charles Gascoigne *quite* at the last, Rawdon."

"And did the Hon. Charles drown himself, Maria?" Rawdon asks. "You know how interested I am in every detail connected with the aristocracy."

Before Maria can answer, Mrs. Crosbie, waking at length from the contemplation of her moiré, remarks that her son is not in evening dress. Is Rawdon aware that in another five minutes dinner will be on the table?

And now, his mother asking him questions, the eyes of Emma, of old Mrs. Hervey, of Maria, all fixed upon him. Rawdon must put his defalcation in the best light he can. If Emmy's note had come one post earlier—an engagement to dine with an old academy chum—starting for China next week—an engagement there is *no* getting out of. He meant to say a simple honest "no," and started by saying it. Before he knows where he is, he finds himself drawn on into half-a-dozen small white lies; very small, very white ones; but that are lies notwithstanding, and that, sooner than he wots of, may rise up in judgment against him.

"Whatever pleases you, pleases us," cries Emma, doing her best to be dignified and cool. "Fortunately, we are not left quite without an escort. Fortunately, Major Hervey has not thrown us over at the last."

A loud double knock comes at the house-door at this very moment. "There is Alfred," says the old lady, raising her eyelids about the sixth of an inch. "Punctual to the moment as usual. You young men of the new school, Rawdon—Miss Marsland, you allow me to lecture, I hope?—might take an example in punctuality from Alfred."

Rawdon, who wants neither examples nor lectures, either, just at present, takes his leave with all the haste he can; and closely following his departure, Major Hervey, Alfred Hervey, the celebrated Adonis, and flower of all the Herveys, is ushered with ceremony by Mr. Maurice into the drawing-room.

Adonis is a small, very well-made man, who dresses, and pads, and dyes for thirty-eight, and is in reality slightly over fifty; like his mother, but with every peculiarity of the Hervey face accentuated—the contemptuous eyebrows more

upraised, the lids more drooping, the delicate greyhound nose flatter to the face. Not a handsome man, above all in profile; and yet one who, if only a fraction of his own modest hints are to be believed, has proved more destructive to women's hearts and to the domestic peace of households than any acknowledged beauty man in London.

No one knows how or why Alfred Hervey was first christened Adonis. I believe that he, himself, originated and stood sponsor for the name in the first instance, and that society at large adopted it as a covert weapon of ridicule afterwards. But the Hervey construction of intellect would never allow any member of the family to realise the possibility of his or her being ridiculed.

"These sobriquets are a sort of heirloom with us," says Adonis, pulling down his long purple-black whiskers, and giving you a supercilious stare from under his heavy eyelids. "Recollect the celebrated handsome Hervey—time of George the First? Not our branch of the family—came over three hundred years before they were heard of—still, the Hervey name—aw;" all Major Hervey's speeches "um" and "aw" themselves into nonentity before he has done with them—"the Hervey family. This kind of sobriquet—er—quite an heirloom in the family."

He advances to his mother and goes through the form of imprinting a salute upon her white old cheek. Then, having languidly bestowed his small gloved hand upon Mrs. Crosbie (and a forefinger upon Maria), on his way, comes to Emma's side; poor little Emma, who, from behind the window-curtain, has been watching the hansom that bore Rawdon away, and at the present moment is trying with all the fortitude she possesses to keep herself from tears.

Adonis expresses his happiness at finding the heiress alone. He whispers, so close that his whiskers tickle her ear, that she never before looked so charming. He makes her feel, without uttering Rawdon Crosbie's name, that her lover is a monster of cruelty and bad taste for having left her.

"I suppose you know, then, that Rawdon has deserted us for good?" cries Emma. "I suppose you know that we are thrown altogether upon your tender mercies, Major Hervey?"

"Rawdon rushed past me—an avalanche, upon my word, an avalanche—on the stairs," says the beau. "His pace and size" (Adonis has an irrepressible dislike for men a head and shoulders taller than himself), "his pace and size—er—made me retreat as far as possible, but I presumed, *en passant*, from Rawdon's appearance, that he could scarcely be thinking of spending the evening in the society—aw—of ladies."

"And so we have no one to take care of us but you. Think of that, Major Hervey," says Emma, piteously. "Four forlorn ladies all under your charge."

Old Mrs. Hervey, whose power of hearing is curiously capricious, turns her head round, on this, towards her son and Emma.

"What is that you are saying, Miss Marsland?" she asks, in her silvery, well-bred, insincere old treble. "Four ladies under Alfred's charge! In virtue of my pre-adamite age you reckon me as two, I conclude?"

Emma answers that Rawdon's place—with a little tremble of the voice, this—Rawdon's place being left vacant, she imagined Maria would like to occupy it.

"You are very obliging, my dear," says the old lady, calmly; "very obliging, but I think not. Our good Maria has letters to write this evening."

Our good Maria, used though she is to being left at home on every occasion when her services are not absolutely wanted, bites her lip, and colours.

"I think I should like to go to the theatre this once," she says, faintly, and gives a glance towards her one hope in existence—Major Hervey.

"Five people are a wrong number for any box," answers Adonis, with cold-blooded promptness. "Even with four—impossible for everyone to see the stage."

"But I don't care for seeing the stage. I prefer a back place. I prefer——"

"My good Maria," says the old lady, suavely, "let us have no discussion. You have your letters to write, and we will tell you to-morrow morning what we think of Mademoiselle Boulotte."

So it is settled. They go down to dinner in old Mrs. Hervey's parlour, which she kindly lends to her relations, during their stay in town, as a dining-room. Mrs. Crosbie, that is to say, orders the daily dinner (and pays for it), and the old lady and Maria are saved the trouble of ordering theirs. The Herveys have a perfect genius for doing kindnesses of this unostentatious sort to their friends.

Emma is placed next to Adonis, and by the time dinner is over has almost ceased to regret young Rawdon's absence. She loves Rawdon Crosbie, heart and soul; loves him as youth loves youth. But the flatteries, the tender whispers of the hardened old heiress-hunter at her side, do not fall altogether powerless on her ear. Long ago, before it was at all a settled thing that she was to be Rawdon's wife, Emma, in her inmost heart, knew that if she chose she might be Major Hervey's; I think, had decided that such a fate would be endurable. Such love as she felt for Rawdon she could, of course, never feel for this elderly Adonis; but she admired him, took him at his own valuation, said to herself that even Rawdon would be improved could he only adopt the finished dress, the Grandisonian manner, the exquisite refinement of style of Major Hervey. "Wherever Adonis goes people look at him, and everyone knows him, and he knows everyone, and it makes one feel like Somebody to be with him." To many a plain little country girl, as well as Emma Marsland, these are powerful attractions for a man who lays himself at *her* feet to possess.

By the time dinner is over Emmy has got over her disappointment at her lover's absence; by the time they are leaving their box at the theatre has almost forgotten the existence of any other man in the world but Major Hervey. The house, as old Mrs. Hervey foretold, is crowded with the best people in London, from royalty downwards. Bows and smiles of recognition come to Adonis from every side. He points out to Emma's dazzled gaze lords, ladies, foreign ambassadors, two cabinet ministers, and a dean in disguise, all looking delighted with the vivacities of Mademoiselle Boulotte. Poor Rawdon! sacrificing himself at the dull altar of friendship with that academy chum of his who is bound for China! Emma cannot but feel some twinges of remorse as she thinks of him, and reflects upon her own enjoyment, her own readiness to be consoled by other society in his absence.

When they are leaving the theatre old Mrs. Hervey declares herself ready for supper. (Think, Reader, of the constitution such a declaration implies! After seventy years' eating and drinking, to be able to dine at six and cry out for supper at eleven!) "You young people have grown too delicate, or dine too late, to care about supper," she remarks. "In my day we would have given nothing for Siddons herself unless we had supped afterwards. What do you say, Miss Marsland? Shall Alfred take us somewhere—I suppose such places exist—where we can have another hour of each other's society, and a chicken salad as well?"

Emma, seldom averse, as we have seen, to the pleasures of the table, gives an animated "Yes" to this proposal; and Adonis is called upon to think of some restaurant to which ladies, at this hour of the night, may *with propriety*—the parenthesis from Mrs. Crosbie—be taken for refreshment.

He answers, with withered playfulness, that he considers—upon his soul, he considers his mother the fastest *débutante* of the season. At this hour of the night where may ladies be taken without impropriety?

"Well, really," Adonis asks, "where may ladies nowadays not be taken without impropriety? You know, there's that corner place close to the Haymarket—Wilmot's—Wilcocks—what the deuce is the name of it? Corner place . . . where you are not inordinately poisoned, for an English restaurant. . . . Wilcocks, of course, it is. Liable to mixed company—actresses, and that sort of thing; still, everyone goes to Wilcocks's—everyone. Major Hervey's particular friend, the Marchioness of Veriphast, and her cousin, Lady Carolina, were there together only the other night—and the best of the joke was, poor Lady Carolina ran across her own husband—had it from the Marchioness herself."

"Well, wherever such distinguished examples lead, we surely may follow," says the old lady, gaily. Mrs. Hervey is really the liveliest companion imaginable to go about London with. Has always, stupidly, left her purse behind her (a family trick of forgetfulness observable in Adonis also); but, except as regards the payment of money, ready and full of spirit for everything. "Now, what do you say, Juliana; may we venture with safety?"

And Mrs. Crosbie, the still small voice drowned, I fear, in the music of that delicious word "Marchioness," has not strength of mind to say "No."

So to the corner place near the Haymarket, where you are not inordinately poisoned, but where actresses and that sort of thing may have to be encountered, the coachman of the mock-private Hervey and Crosbie brougham is ordered to proceed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MIDNIGHT MEETING

And Rawdon? Driving back, as quickly as a well-bribed cabby can drive him, to his hotel, Rawdon orders some food, rushes up to dress, swallows a beefsteak, tough and gory as a British steak should be, and arrives at the Theobalds' lodgings in Maddox Street exactly a quarter of an hour behind the appointed time.

When the door opens the two ladies are in the act of descending the stairs. Jane is simply dressed in white, no ornaments in her brown hair, a bouquet of flowers, fresh from Covent Garden this morning, in her hand. Miss Minnie Arundel is a vision of grandeur awful to behold! hair raised in elaborate pyramids at the back; hair descending in fluffy clouds to the eyebrows; a satin train; a pannier, trimmed with tulles and laces; rouge; pearl-powder; a strong odour of Guards Bouquet; a laced pocket-handkerchief; a pair of costly opera-glasses, and a fan. It is a theory of Min's that if you hide handsome presents under a bushel you may just as well never get handsome presents at all. (Not an incorrect theory, surely; see the court newspaper, if you would learn how even the brides of refined society display *their* trophies to an admiring world.) And to-night, with some covert design, perhaps, of bewildering Rawdon's infantine mind, she has literally hung herself round with spoils.

How can so much grandeur ever be compressed within the narrow limits of a four-wheeler? Jane gets in first; Miss Arundel follows; the cab is more than full; laces, tulles and ribbons puff forth through the open windows on either side.

"And I'll go on the box," says Rawdon, as he stands, his opera-hat under his arm, his slim, six-foot figure very upright, on the pavement.

"Indeed, you'll do nothing of the kind," cries Jane. "I felt a drop of rain on my face as we

came out. You must get as close to me as you can, and we'll let Min have a whole side to herself and her finery."

Rawdon, not very reluctantly, obeys; the cabman shuts the door with a bang, and off they start. Perfumed clouds of gauzy material pervade the whole cab, settle on the young artilleryman's knees, ascend and touch his chin: he can scarce get a glimpse of the poor little happy over-rouged, over-dressed woman opposite, to whom they belong.

"We were just beginning to think what we should do if you didn't come," she cries—shrieks, rather, in vain efforts to out-voice the rattling of the cab. "What made you late? Did the extremely serious family enter objections at the last?"

"Why, Min, you little goose!" says Jane, "the serious family are all safe down in Chalkshire. Do you think Rawdon would dare be dancing attendance upon you and me if his lawful owners were in London."

And Rawdon volunteers no explanation. Oh, what spirits he is in! How thoroughly he enjoys his drive with Jane and her sister in this dingy four-wheeler, and through unfashionable London streets, redolent of the dust and heat and closeness normal to London streets of a July evening! Min loses her fan, her opera-glasses, the order for the theatre, before they have gone a hundred yards; and Rawdon must help her to search for each in its turn. And the fan is found hanging on her wrist, and the opera-glasses—how in the world did they get there?—are in Rawdon's hand, and the order is inside her own glove. And then how they both laugh, as if they had been saying or doing something wonderfully witty, over each discovery!

"I'm sure I hope you are going to behave yourselves like rational beings at last," says Jane, when they are entering the theatre. "Rawdon, give Min your arm, and lead the way—oh! but I wish it, please. Just as if I would take our *only beau* away from Min!"

And so they proceed to the stalls. Here Miss Arundel draws back for her sister, who, as a married lady, enters and takes her place first. The natural consequence of this is, that Rawdon, following last, is divided, during the whole of the evening, from Mrs. Theobald.

He feels certain that the arrangement was preconcerted between the sisters; turns furious; turns sulky. Then resolving to show that he, in his turn, can be indifferent, begins to flirt with all his might with Miss Minnie Arundel.

This is exactly the object for which Jane invited him to accompany them. Poor old Min must be amused! She looks round at him with one of her friendliest smiles, leans over, and whispers, that unless they behave better she shall feel it her duty—her positive duty, "as a friend of Mr. Crosbie's family," to divide them. And Rawdon's ill-temper flies.

Jane, in her simple dress, looks doubly fair to him, contrasted with the marvels of hairdressing and millinery presented by her sister. Amidst the mingled odours of Miss Arundel's laced handkerchief and of the dainty pink play-bills with which the stalls are rustling, Rawdon can detect—or, the same thing, imagines he can detect—the faint country smell of the flowers in her hand. He whispers, flirts, looks tenderly into Miss Arundel's black eyes. But Miss Arundel is not here at all! And the theatre, and the soft-playing orchestra, and the well-dressed people, and the pink play-bills, are not real. And he stands with Jane alone, as he stood in the starlight at Spa, or in the silent old garden at Theobalds. She listens to his pleadings at last. There is no Francis Theobald, no Emma Marsland, in the world, and . . .

"You are talking great rubbish," says Miss Arundel, coquettishly, in answer to one of his most high-flown compliments. "Who would have thought a child of your age had learnt the ways of this wicked world already?"

Well, the evening passes only too quickly, and although he does not speak a dozen words to Jane, proves certainly one of the red-letter evenings of Rawdon Crosbie's life. "Excellent company to be at a play with," is Miss Minnie Arundel. She is the humblest of all humble actresses herself; but not a point, not a delicate shade in the acting of artists gifted with superior powers to her own, is lost upon her. And Rawdon, quick to see as others see, to feel as others feel, enjoys with her enjoyment. A pleasant and appreciative companion; a cool, softly-lit theatre; a luxurious stall; the perfect representation of the most perfect love story ever put upon the stage, and the presence, divided from her though he may be, that constitutes the whole world to his foolish boy's heart . . . What happier evening is Rawdon Crosbie ever likely to know?

When it is over, and they are leaving the theatre, the question of supper arises (as in another case we know of), or rather the question of where they shall sup—supper being looked upon as a matter of course by Miss Minnie Arundel.

She proposes one or two rather well-known places of popular entertainment, but at each proposal Jane shakes her head.

"I haven't much belief in your recommendations, Min, and I don't want to take this poor child anywhere outrageously fast. Rawdon and I have characters to lose, remember."

"Oh, I don't know anything about characters," cries Min, with her hearty laugh. "The question that concerns me is, where can we get the best supper and the most amusement. Of course, if we wanted to do the thing in style, and"—with a glance at Rawdon—"if expense was no object, we ought to go to Wilcocks's. Wilcocks's is a tip-top place close to the Haymarket," Miss Arundel hastens to explain; "a place where you see the very heaviest swells. The last time I supped there, I and Blanche Bolingbroke, we had little Fred Ramsay with us. Fred has got the aristocracy at his fingers' ends, you know;

and I can tell you he pointed out two ladies of rank and title in the rooms at the same time."

"Then by all means let us go to Wilcocks's at once," says Rawdon. "How can we tell, if we are very lucky, that we may not see some ladies of rank and title, too? Only, unfortunately, we shall have no one to point them out."

"Except Charles, the head waiter," says Min, in all simplicity. "He's an old friend of mine; I knew him well when he was in the restaurant at the Crystal Palace; Charles knows almost as many of the swells by sight as Fred Ramsay himself."

And a minute or two later, Rawdon having hailed and piloted the ladies to a cab, to Wilcocks's they drive.

They are early, not having waited for the after-piece at the Prince of Wales's, and find the rooms nearly empty. Min, who is evidently quite at home with the establishment and the people belonging to it, points out a little marble table in the corner immediately facing the entrance as one of the most desirable in the rooms. "You are cool there, close by the ferns and fountain, and out of the way, and have the advantage of seeing all the company as they pass in and out." And accordingly at this table—fatal little marble table, when will Rawdon forget it?—they take their places and prepare to look over the *carte*.

At Rawdon's request, Miss Arundel undertakes to preside at the entertainment; and this, Reader, is the barbaric bill of fare selected by her:

Fried kidneys—Min knows nothing about gastronomic laws of sequence, but orders things pell-pell, just as they strike her fancy—fried kidneys; sausages; cold duck; fried potatoes; cherry tart, and cream; Stilton cheese, pulled bread, radishes. And champagne to begin, continue, and finish the repast with.

Barbaric, but not unappetising; and Rawdon, after his wretched dinner, is hungry, and the ladies, who dined early, are hungrier still; and they all sup, not fashionably, dallying with a fork and bit of bread over a mayonnaise, but with a will.

The viands are good; the champagne, if not of the very choicest brand, is sparkling, sweet, and heady. By the time the stage of cherry tart is reached they are all in the highest spirits, and making, I will not say more noise, but more open demonstrations of light-heartedness, than the finest breeding might, perhaps, approve of in a public supper-room.

However, there is no one present to be shocked. The ladies of rank and title have, it would seem, gone elsewhere to-night. There is certainly no outward sign of their presence among the company at Wilcocks's.

"You told us we should be sure of a good supper here, Miss Arundel," says Rawdon, "and we are having a most excellent one. But where are the heavy swells? What a pity your friend with the aristocracy at his fingers' ends is not here. He might tell us whether we are supping among common people like ourselves, or dukes and marchionesses in disguise."

"The aristocracy will come by-and-by, in crowds," says the little actress, jealous for the reputation of Wilcocks's. "At this moment I can see ladies in opera cloaks, getting out of a private carriage." Min is so placed as to command a view of the pavement outside the restaurant. "Yes, here we are in great form—black velvet and marabout feathers; scarlet hair and scarlet ribbons; venerable old party in point lace; oppressively fine gentleman, with Dundreary whiskers. The heavy swells are coming in earnest at last."

"Better late than never," remarks Rawdon, cheerily. Have I not said that the champagne has taken favourable effect on the spirits of them all? And, leaning back in his chair, he turns, in order to get a fuller view of the new arrivals.

They enter in a group of four. Little Major Hervey first, in finished evening dress, with eyelids drooping, with his long flat nose in the air, his opera-hat under one arm, Mrs. Crosbie, affable, yet slightly rigid of demeanour, as though prepared for contingencies, upon the other; Emma and old Mrs. Hervey follow behind.

"Well! they *are* queer-looking samples, I must say," cries Min, when she has examined them critically. "Unless Wilcocks gets better specimens of the aristocracy than that I shall take my patronage elsewhere. Have some sweets, my dear boy?" liberally piling up the plate of the unhappy young gunner with cherry tart and cream. "Oh, nonsense about having done. You must be in love, as well as engaged, if you can't eat. I want you to keep me in countenance. Jenny, my dear, pass over the champagne—the evening is only just beginning."

Only just beginning! A chill of horror passed through Rawdon Crosbie's suddenly-sobered veins at the thought.

CHAPTER XXV

WITH DOUBTFUL ASSOCIATES

A WAITER bows the new-comers forward to one of the centre tables. They take their places; Major Hervey—scanning the *carte* at arm's length, and with uplifted eyebrows—orders one or two of the dishes "that we may hope will be least likely to poison us; with wine, whatever it is, that is sure to poison us!" and then the ladies begin to look a little about them at the surrounding company.

"I trust Alfred has done right in allowing us to come here," whispers Mrs. Crosbie to old Mrs. Hervey, who generally manages to get back her sense of hearing in public places. "Do you really think all these *persons* look correct?"

"In the present day, my dear," answers the old lady cheerfully, "it is quite impossible to say who is correct and who is incorrect. There used to be a costume for the members of each world, but fashion has changed; class trenches upon class more and more, and we must go with the times. I hope they will serve us with a tolerable mayonnaise. I protest Mademoiselle Boulotte has given me quite an appetite."

But Mrs. Crosbie, at once less of an optimist and less of a cynic than the older woman, is not so easily made comfortable. If she could but be assured of the presence of a marchioness, a Lady Carolina, nay, even of a plain knight's wife, in these heated, flaring supper-rooms, she would be satisfied. For it is not so much evil itself, evil in the abstract, as the fear of doing what no one else does, of being seen where no one else is seen, that ever lies with heaviest weight on Mrs. Crosbie's conscience.

"I wish Rawdon had come with us," she remarks, leaning forward and addressing Major Hervey, who is with Emma upon the other side of the table. "I am sure at these sorts of doubtful places one cannot have too strong an escort of gentlemen."

"Oh, mamma, I think we are getting on delightfully!" cries Emma. Major Hervey is unfastening the heiress's glove, and either his elderly eyes do not see very clear, or some peculiarity about the button-hole causes the process to be unusually slow. "If Rawdon chose to have a stupid engagement elsewhere, why—why——"

The words die on her lips; her face turns to a sickly pallor, then crimson. "Why, there *is* Rawdon himself!" gasps out Miss Marsland, sinking back in her chair, and giving fiery glances across at the corner table, where her lover sits facing her; facing her, but I am bound to say looking, soldier though he be, as if he would fain sink bodily down through the floor; and with his eyes ignominiously fixed upon the heap of cherry tart and cream with which Min's friendly hand has loaded his plate.

"Rawdon!" repeats Mrs. Crosbie, getting ready her double eyeglasses. "Now, I call this a very timely *rencontre*. With his academy school friend, no doubt?"

"Rawdon is with Mrs. Theobald," says Emma, her voice trembling. "Mrs. Theobald and a Person—a Person who is no doubt Mrs. Theobald's sister, the actress. Oh, I'm sure of it, mamma, from the likeness. Oh, how dreadful!" And Emma's very breath fails her, so vehement is her righteous indignation.

"Yes, there is our young Rawdon," says Major Hervey, with charming amiability. "Saw him the moment we came in. Perhaps," he pointedly addresses Mrs. Crosbie, not Emma, "as Rawdon is in *another kind* of society, it is a case—um—in which recognition may be—er—as well left alone?"

Mrs. Crosbie turns her head, gracefully severe in its black velvet bands and marabout feathers, and for the space of some moments gazes stonily through her glasses on the culprits: on Mrs. Theobald, whose blue eyes return the gaze as steadily as on the day when she was first mistaken in Spa for a princess; on Rawdon, purple with confusion; on Min, duly informed by Jane of the serious family's advent, and upon whose expressive mouth the broadest merriment is visible.

"I must ask you to conduct us from this place, Alfred." And, as she speaks, Mrs. Crosbie turns slowly round again from the awful sight of Rawdon's iniquities. "You are, of course, not aware in what society Rawdon is? An inhabitant of our own neighbourhood, whom we do not visit, and a person whom I believe—I can have no certain knowledge on such a point—whom I believe to be. . . . theatrical! I must ask you to give Emma your arm, and conduct us to our carriage at once."

Adonis now leans across the table, and in four words puts the situation before old Mrs. Hervey "Rawdon supping with actresses." Awkward position; but still—Adonis believes his mother will agree with him?—one in which good taste bids one—aw—see nothing, and act—er—just as if nothing had happened. And his fingers, which still enclose Emma's wrist, give her a tenderly reassuring little pressure as he says this.

"Of course, of course we see nothing," says the fine old Pharisee, pleasantly. "Miss Marsland, my dear, you have the gas immediately before your eyes. You had better come on this side. These things occur every day, and Rawdon has far too much good taste, I am sure, recognise us. Yes, Mademoiselle Boulotte has given me quite an appetite. She is the best actress I have seen the last hundred years."

Emma, however, is neither a Pharisee nor a woman of the world, but a girl, very warmly, very earnestly in love, and trembling in every fibre with anger and jealousy. "Thanks, Mrs. Hervey. I think I *shall* be glad to change my position." And she rises, and with cool, insulting emphasis of manner, turns her back deliberately upon her lover and his friends, then draws her chair to old Mrs. Hervey's side. "These things may happen every day," adds Emma, in a voice of suppressed passion; and somehow, as she says this, she knows that her eyes seek Major Hervey's for support. "They will not happen to me twice; I am very sure of that."

Mrs. Crosbie's maternal heart gives a throb of cold terror. Is the price of this escapade, this crowning folly of Rawdon's, to be Emma Marsland's thirty thousand pounds, and all the county position, all the sacred blessings of existence that thirty thousand pounds can bring with them?

"Don't you think the fault may be a little ours in coming here, my dear Emma? We must scold Alfred for that. As regards Rawdon, young men——"

"If they be men of honour, speak the truth, at least," cries Emma, with greater spirit, perhaps, than she had ever shown in her life before. "Rawdon could not come with us, remember,

because he had to dine with a school-friend who was going to China—to China, indeed! However, it will be a question to settle between Rawdon and me; between Rawdon and me alone," adds Emma, indignantly. "Don't let anyone's supper be spoilt by talking about it now."

And so, the shoulders of the three ladies set resolutely against the faces of the foe, supper is eaten. Major Hervey seems to be in unwonted spirits, and never lets the conversation flag for an instant. Disregarding the poisonous nature of the dishes set before him, he even eats and drinks; shows his magnificent teeth to the gold, as he smiles at Emma and his own stories; and all the time manages to give an occasional glance of insolent admiration in the direction of Jane and of her sister, that makes young Rawdon's blood boil.

What an anti-climax to the evening that began so happily at the Prince of Wales's—listening to a delightfully-acted love idyll, dreaming a still more delightful idyll of one's own! Were he to follow impulse merely, Rawdon Crosbie would march straight, with his companions, from the rooms; spare Jane the humiliation, covert though it be, with which his own ludicrous position is clothing her. But, with Min's laughing eyes fixed upon him, he dare not thus show the better part of valour. All he dare do is—sit still; return the glances of Adonis with savage interest; force himself to laugh and jest with the best grace he can; drink champagne, every glass of which seems to make his soul flatter and flatter; and watch the back of Emmy's scarlet streamers and of his mother's marabouts.

Jane at length brings his sufferings to an end. "If we have all finished . . . . it seems a pity to hurry when we are so comfortable . . . . but if we have all really finished, we may as well be off. I don't want Theobald to get home before I do." And Rawdon acquiescing only too promptly, she rises (by a furtive turn of the head Emma's jealous eyes can watch every movement of her rival's slight, graceful figure), coolly surveys herself, as she adjusts her opera cloak in a neighbouring mirror; then, with an air of calmest appropriation, puts her hand within Rawdon's arm, and, followed by Min, who bestows a saucy smile of adieu upon the family party as she goes by, leaves the room.

Rawdon pays the cost of the entertainment to the head waiter, who stands, bill in hand, at the door, and to whom the actress gives a friendly "Good-bye, Charles," at parting. And then they go out into the night.

Min is in the sort of wild spirits that succeed naturally to a pleasantly spent evening, and an excellent supper and heady champagne; and she "chaffs" Rawdon unmercifully. His mamma, his sweetheart, the gentleman with the eyelids, the lecture that awaits him, Rawdon, to-morrow—all are pantomimed by Miss Arundel, for his benefit, as they stand outside the door of Wilcocks's, waiting for an empty cab to pass along. But Jane is dead silent, and continues so during the whole of the drive back to Maddox Street.

"Thanks for a very jolly evening," says Min, when Rawdon, after dismissing the cab, is preparing to wish the ladies good-night at the door of Theobald's lodgings. "I suppose we shall see each other again before we die?"

"A great many times, I should hope, if life is to be worth holding," answers Rawdon Crosbie.

"I'm going to the Chalkshire races with Jane and Theobald, if I shouldn't see you before, and then—but no," cries the little actress, looking up into his face with an air of mock pity; "after to-night's experience we won't make plans. Cruel to talk of what the future might bring forth to anyone in your precarious situation."

And then, with all her satins and furbelows rustling, away Min runs up the stairs; and Rawdon, whose present fate appears to be to feel like a culprit before everyone, is left alone with Jane. Maddox Street, at this hour, is almost silent. An occasional passer-by on foot, the distant drone of carriage-wheels in Regent Street, are all that break the quiet. They are as much alone as they were on Sunday evening, in the moss-grown garden at Theobalds.

"That was a queer kind of meeting for us all to-night, I must say," remarks Jane, amicably, yet with a certain tone in her voice that Rawdon has learnt to dread. "Why didn't you tell me your people were in town?"

"Oh, I—I thought I had mentioned it. Yes, my mother and Emma came up on Monday. They are spending a few days with our relations, the Herveys."

He does his best to speak lightly, as if nothi[illegible]f any moment had occurred, and fails egregiously.

"The Herveys. Are those the people I saw them with at the supper-rooms?"

"Yes."

Jane hesitates for a minute before she speaks again. A street lamp immediately opposite shines full upon her face, and Rawdon can see a tell-tale quiver about the corners of her lips. She hesitates, but for a minute only; then, in her usual impetuous fashion, breaks forth thus: "I'm sorry this has happened, Rawdon, because it's going to bring things to a smash between you and me; and yet, in another way, I'm glad. It has opened my eyes pretty sharply to something good for me to see. Now, my dear child, listen, and take the best bit of advice that has ever been given you in your life yet. Cut me. I'm a bad business, as far as you are concerned. Have nothing more to say to me."

He makes no answer, and probably Jane expects none. She must guess pretty accurately, one would think, what the poor young fellow feels just at this moment.

"Of course I knew how we stood towards each other before this, or I ought. I've had lessons enough on all useful subjects of late; but it never came home to me like it did to-night. For there was Min, you see! I've been so long out of the profession that I seem neither one thing nor the other—to myself at least.

Min is the real genuine article, an actress in heart, soul, body. Min shows me what *I* am to people like your mother and Miss Marsland. Rawdon, if we had been—if poor Min and I had been a pair of escaped convicts," cries Jane, with a half-fierce, half-sad sort of a little laugh, "we could scarce have been looked at with eyes of more pious horror. Why, even you——"

"Mrs. Theobald! ——"

"No; hear me out. Even you knew too well what was due—that's the word I think?—due to yourself and to the girl you mean to marry to leave our side and speak to her. Well, you see, I don't mean to be placed like that again, 'not never no more,' as Blossy says. If those ladies were anything to you but what they are, I should say simply, 'Choose between them and me, and I am the best worth choosing.' I can't say that as it is, can I?"

Yes; she can say what she likes; she has only to speak to command him in all things, cries Rawdon's heart! But his lips do not give utterance to this avowal of disallegiance.

"And so, what I do say is—cut me. I'll give you another bit of wise and wholesome advice. Run away to-morrow morning, early, to Miss Marsland, and make the prettiest apology you can for being seen with such *doubtful associates*. You broke some lawful engagement, by-the-by, Master Rawdon, did you not, in order to go to 'School' with us?"

"I would have broken any engagement, lawful or the reverse, on the chance of going anywhere with you," answers Rawdon Crosbie.

"I thought so. Theobald says I have instinct, no reason. I suppose it must have been instinct made me guess how the land lay as I sat humbly looking at the tips of your mamma's marabouts. Well, apologise! Say you will never do it again—say we over-persuaded you; put as much blame on Min and me as you like! But make things straight if you can, and get Miss Marsland to name the wedding-day as soon as possible. Good-night."

"And you think—you think that you are going to be rid of me like this!" cries Rawdon, hotly; and as he speaks he leans his arm within the door, so as to hinder Jane, if she wished to do so, from shutting it. "Be a little franker, Mrs. Theobald! Say straight out you are tired of me; say that, from some cause or another, you want me out of the way for a time, and I'll stop away till you bid me come back——"

"And suppose I am not tired of you, and suppose I have no reason whatever for wishing you out of the way?" she interrupts. "Don't be a fool a second time, Rawdon. Take what I say in plain good part, as I mean it. Miss Marsland lives in a world that is not the world of women like Min and me, and you cannot, honestly, remain her sweetheart and my friend. You have to make your choice. Well, there can't even be a question as to where your choice must lie. I am nothing to you; Miss Marsland is, or will be, everything. Cry *peccavi*, Rawdon, as you ought, and be quite sure—although, most likely, we shan't know each other to speak to in the time to come—that I shall be your friend at heart always. Now, really, good-night. I am standing in a draught."

But Rawdon's arm does not move.

"I have only one thing more to ask you. When is this cut eternal, of which you talk so cheerfully, to take place? I like to know accurately on what ground I stand."

"When? Why, when you are married, to be sure. Do you think I would speak to any man whose wife——"

"No," interrupts Rawdon, quickly, "of course you would not; I know that only too well. But suppose I never have a wife at all? Oh, such a contingency is quite on the cards, Mrs. Theobald! I promise to follow your advice before I go back to Woolwich to-morrow morning. If truth-telling can set things straight," almost with a groan he brings out this, "well and good. But suppose truth-telling results, as it will very probably do, in things becoming more crooked than before, will you cut me then?"

"It makes my head ache to think of so many 'ifs' and 'ands,'" says Jane, a little coldly. "Do what you know to be right, without thinking of anything but that it *is* right, and be kind enough to forget that there is such a person as Jane Theobald in the world."

"Forget!" but now Rawdon takes his arm away from the door. "Yes, that sort of cold-blooded advice is so remarkably easy to give! When may I see you next?" he persists. "When may I come down to Theobalds to tell you . . that I have forgotten you? Sunday? No? Monday then? I know I can get leave on Monday."

"Leave—from whom? Your commanding officer, or Miss Marsland? Rawdon, child, don't play fast and loose with your conscience any more. What earthly thing can you want at Theobalds now?"

"I shall want to tell you the result of your own good advice, in the first place."

"I shall guess that, when I hear the wedding bells ringing in Lidlington church."

"And if no wedding bells are ever rung with which I am concerned? Oh, Mrs. Theobald, don't trifle with me—don't torture me! Tell me when I may come and see you next?"

For a brief space Jane remains silent; then, "You will not come to see me, and you will not write to me for one clear fortnight," she tells him firmly. "By that time you'll know, I suppose, whether you are in a position to have *doubtful associates* or not. And then, the odds are, my dear boy, you will cut me, or I you, which will come to the same thing. Now, good-bye." For a moment she lets Rawdon hold her hand, then moves away from him into the house. "Perhaps, if the Fates are kind," turning to give him a last smile over her shoulder, "the cut eternal won't come till after the Chalkshire races! I hope it won't—for Min's sake."

And with this exceedingly small crumb of consolation, young Rawdon Crosbie is forced to be satisfied.

CHAPTER XXVI

RAWDON CRIES PECCAVI!

By eleven next morning, angry, repentant, resolute, all in a breath, he calls in Bolton Row.

"The ladies up yet?" Yes, it is Mr. Maurice's belief that the ladies *har* up; yes, it is Mr. Maurice's belief (solemn is Maurice's tone, and ominous, as of a man aware that family feuds are brewing) that the ladies will be able to see Mr. Rawdon Crosbie. But he will just inquire.

Mr. Rawdon Crosbie is kept waiting a couple of minutes or more, on the door-step—a council-of-war, he feels sure, going on as to whether he shall be admitted at all—then is ushered, not upstairs to his mother's drawing-room as usual, but into old Mrs. Hervey's parlour on the ground-floor.

This looks significant: a kind of "scene in the front grooves," introduced to allow the machinists to prepare some imposing set picture in the background; and Rawdon collects his strength together for the ordeal which he knows to be forthcoming. The sitting-room communicates with another by folding-doors, which at the present moment are closed. Maria Hervey, alone, sits at a small table near the window, pretending to write.

She rises, gives Rawdon a clammy hand, and pointedly cool reception; then takes a chair, at as safe and uncontagious a distance as the dimensions of the room will permit, and looks at the hearthrug. Evidently this ancient maiden has heard of last night's misadventure, and will contract as little contamination as possible from a person of Rawdon Crosbie's desperate and abandoned character. He is not in a temper to derive amusement, as he generally does, from Maria's hatred for him; and inquires, somewhat curtly, for his mother and Emma. "He must return to Woolwich by the mid-day train, and has not much time to lose, so——"

"Your poor mamma, I believe, purposes to see you shortly, Rawdon," interrupts Maria, without lifting her eyes from the hearthrug. "I am quite unable to inform you whether Miss Marsland will feel equal to the reception of visitors to-day."

"Equal? Why, what's the matter?" says Rawdon, determined to set things straight, even with Maria Hervey. "Emma seemed to be enjoying very excellent health and spirits when I saw her last, at about one o'clock this morning."

"Oh! Really! It is not my wish to hear anything of . . . of the occurrence to which you allude. Miss Marsland has been very far from well, for some hours past—out of one hysterical fit into another—her strength quite exhausted. Indeed, I believe it is Mrs. Hervery's intention, should no amendment take place, to send for the family apothecary."

"And I, of course, shall only be in the way," says Rawdon. "So, unless there is a chance of my mother being able to see me for five minutes, I may as well be off at once."

Our good Maria, upon this, rises and leaves the room. Stealthy whispers are audible through the folding doors; the rustle of a silk dress is presently heard, ascending the stairs. Then comes the sound of descending footsteps. An instant or two later the door opens, and in walks—not Mrs. Crosbie, but Adonis Hervey. Adonis, who, on ordinary occasions, is never ready for the eye of man, much less of woman, before two or three o'clock in the afternoon.

He enters: for once in his life lifts his eyelids sufficiently to give Rawdon Crosbie a steady stare.

"Good morning to you."

"Good morning."

Major Hervey extends a couple of chill, thin fingers, which his young relative barely touches in return; then there is silence. Rawdon, his back to the empty fireplace, keeps his head at the altitude of five feet eleven, superbly aloft. Adonis, at the altitude of five feet four, stands languidly pulling his scanty purple-black whiskers for a minute or two, then sinks down into the nearest armchair, suppresses a yawn, and begins to contemplate his nails.

"Deuced foolish little *rencontre* that, last night—eh, Rawdon?" Something in the shape of one of his long, delicate nails seems to be amiss; for, as he speaks, Major Hervey surveys it closely, and with an air of discontent.

Rawdon, who, as we have seen, is in no humour this morning for circumlocution, responds brusquely, "What *rencontre*?"

"Why, running across you and your friends in those infernal supper-rooms—Wilmots, Wilcocks—what the deuce is the name? Ladies would go—know what ladies are when they take a thing into their heads." I omit the multitudinous "ums" and "ahs" with which Major Hervey interlards conversation. "Mrs. Crosbie terribly cut up, poor thing; Miss Marsland hysterical. Tried to reason with them—my mother tried to reason with them—singular tact and experience in these little matters, my mother. No use." Major Hervey shakes his head with an air of bored but well-bred sympathy.

"I am really very much indebted to you, and to Mrs. Hervey also, if you have been trying to reason on my behalf," says Rawdon, coldly. "At the same time I must confess I cannot see how, or why, any argument was necessary. Perhaps you would be good enough to speak in plainer language? I am a very poor hand at expounding riddles. Has my mother—has Miss Marsland—sent me any message through you? and, if so, would you, as my time is short, be good enough to deliver it in three words?"

Major Hervey takes out a gold toothpick, and looks at it attentively; then (remembering, perhaps, of what some mortals' teeth are made) returns it to his waistcoat pocket. "I am considerably older than you, my dear Rawdon," he remarks at last, resting an elbow on each arm of the chair, and joining the extreme tips of his fleshless white fingers.

Rawdon does not dispute the proposition.

"Considerably older, and—you will forgive me for saying so—considerably worldly-wiser. This foolish little *rencontre*—the society—deuced nice society, in its way—which Miss Marsland saw you in last night—um—ah. Deuced bad thing, I'm afraid, for your prospects as an engaged man, Rawdon!"

"I am much obliged for your solicitude, Major Hervey; at the same time, I must repeat, I think you are expending it needlessly."

"You think so? Ah, you have much to learn, my dear friend—much to learn! Women—women," says Major Hervey, complacently, "have been the study of my life. I have had extraordinary opportunities, especially as regards phases of *jealousy*—of analysing their little weaknesses——"

Rawdon looks at his watch impatiently.

"And I seldom find myself wrong in any conclusions I arrive at with respect to them. This foolish *contretemps* of last night is one of the worst things—just one of *the* worst things—that could have happened for you at the present time. You understand me?"

"I hear you."

"And, really, the whole affair is too puerile! For don't—don't for a moment think," adds Adonis, with a little outbreak of boyish expansion, "that I put myself in the position of a mentor. On the contrary, personally speaking, I only commend your taste. That blonde, with the figure and the blue eyes—my dear Rawdon, all I regretted was, that circumstances did not permit me to ask for an introduction."

"You would have asked in vain, I'm afraid," says Rawdon, with the air of a young emperor. "I am not in the habit of introducing men I meet in public places to the ladies of my acquaintance."

"Ah! dog in the manger, on principle, eh? Wise rule, I dare say, for you. Who is your other friend, Rawdon—the little thing with black eyes and the fan? Your mother—poor dear soul!—has been telling me about the blonde (upon my word, in a certain demi-monde style, she's as fine-looking a woman as I've seen out this season); but the other?—we only surmise as to the other."

"The little thing with black eyes and the fan is a Miss Johnson, tolerably well-known in theatrical circles as Miss Minnie Arundel," Rawdon answers, holding his nose still in air, but keeping his temper miraculously.

"So we imagined—and feared! Absurd—positively absurd!—the dread women all have of actresses—as if they hadn't just as much, and more, to fear from the women of their own world! Well, and this Mrs. . . . Mrs. Theobald? From what your mother tells me, she appears to be the lawfully-wedded wife of a man I remember once in Paris. Tall man—yellow hair—eye-glass? Exactly. Didn't know him personally; never saw him at the Embassy; not in my set at all. Man with a story attached to him—turns the king a little too easily at *écarté*? No? Well, if not that, something of the kind." This is the true Hervey mode of suggesting away character. "And now, it seems, married—*married* to a dancing-girl! Rawdon, my dear fellow, take the advice of a man old enough to be your—elder brother, and follow out your good mother's wishes. I came down at her request, poor soul, to speak to you. Drop the acquaintance of this too-charming Mrs. Theobald until after your marriage, at least."

"And then resume it, of course?" Rawdon asks.

"Oh, then do as you think fit," says Adonis with a satyr-like little chuckle. "A married man is in a very different position to an engaged one. How is your excellent father, Rawdon?" Major Hervey suppresses another yawn, and really looks ready to sink with fatigue. The discharge of all this heavy family duty has evidently been too much for his strength. "Fewer gouty symptoms than when I was last in Chalkshire?"

Boiling over with indignation, but still managing to keep his temper outwardly, Rawdon gives as succinct an account of Mr. Crosbie's gouty symptoms as can be given short of positive rudeness; and his mentor closes his eyes and leans his head back in his chair. After two or three minutes thus spent, the door again opens noiselessly, and Maria, putting on a face and voice as though someone lay dead in the house, informs Rawdon that, if he walks softly, he may go up and see his poor mamma in the drawing-room.

He goes up and finds his poor mamma waiting in state to receive him, an open letter in her hand. Emma, with emerald-green ribbons in her hair, and with swollen red eyes, reposes on the sofa, a shawl over her feet, and a smelling-bottle applied to her nose. Why should a man be made to feel himself a brute by the mere fact of a young woman holding a smelling-bottle to her nose and having swollen eyes? As Rawdon came up the stairs his spirit was rebellious, his heart, under the influence of Major Hervey's good advice, hard as the nether millstone; and now, at the first sight of Emma, and of her poor little nicely-got-up apparatus of affliction, he softens into repentance.

"Why, Emmy, what is all this? Something new for you to have hysterics," he cries, coming up to her side, with hand out-stretched.

By way of answer Miss Marsland raises her handkerchief to her face. "I've been very foo—foo—foolish!" she sobs; "it will never happen—no, no, mamma dear, it will never happen again. Ah!"

"My dearest girl," says Mrs. Crosbie, leaning soothingly over her future daughter-in-law, "be composed. Rawdon, have the goodness to stand aside. With her disposition to *faintness*, Rawdon, the result of painful nervous excitement, our dear Emma requires air. Be perfectly composed, my love, and allow me to speak. Now, remember your promise!"

Thus appealed to, Miss Marsland buries her head down on the sofa-cushion and applies her

salts-bottle to her nostrils with such vigour that her poor swollen eyes wink again. Very few women look their fairest under the influence of strong mental excitement, and Emmy is no exception to the rule.

"Dear Emma has gone through a most distressing night," says Mrs. Crosbie, regarding her son with icy sternness; "but she does not judge you, Emma is too generous to judge you, unheard. For what occurred yesterday evening, the humiliating circumstances under which we met you, sir, I leave you to make your apologies to her, and to her alone; but I have a word or two which we both—Emma, my love, which we both think it is my duty to say first. I have had a letter from Mrs. Pippin, Rawdon."

"A letter from Mrs. Pippin!" repeats Rawdon, with unaffected innocence.

"And she tells me—but I almost refuse to believe it; yes, even on Mrs. Pippin's word, and in spite of what I saw last night, I almost refuse to believe such an accusation against my own son—that you—you have put this woman's name up for ballot at our Lidlington Croquet Club."

"Seconded by that shameful Mr. Smylie," cries out Emma from the depths of the sofa-cushion; "and just going to take his priest's orders! I'm sure the bishop ought to be written to."

"Is it true? Is this scandalous accusation true?" says Mrs. Crosbie, as the culprit stands, silent with the silence of conscious guilt. "If you have done this thing, you will not, I should hope, be ashamed to acknowledge it."

"Ashamed! What of?" answers Rawdon. He speaks with an attempt at cheerfulness, but his voice is very far indeed from natural. His mother's ice-cold face, those quivering green ribbons, those plump white fingers passionately twitching round the salts-bottle, are by no means reassuring objects for him to look at. "If by 'this woman' you mean Mrs. Theobald, certainly I proposed her as a member of the Lidlington Croquet Club, and Smylie seconded the proposition. Let me see," he goes on, with the audacity of desperation, "that was on Saturday last. I think I said something to you about it at the time, Emmy? Mrs. Theobald will be balloted for to-morrow."

"Mrs. Theobald balloted for! Rawdon, if it were not that this person had been put up by you, by my son, I doubt if the form of a ballot would be gone through at all. You are not aware, perhaps, that there is a rule empowering the club, under certain most rare, most aggravated circumstances, to dispense with a ballot altogether. Well, there is such a rule then—number twenty-three. 'If any person notoriously——'"

"Mother, stop!" interrupts Rawdon, the blood rushing hotly across his face. "I will hear no one—no, mother, not even you—speak lightly of Mrs. Theobald."

"I do not speak lightly of her, Rawdon, I do not speak lightly of anyone, upon my own responsibility. I trust I know my Christian duty too well for that. If you had heard me out you would have been aware that the severest word employed in rule twenty-three is—'ineligible.' 'If any person notoriously ineligible shall——'"

"Yes; but why is Mrs. Theobald ineligible? Before I acknowledge myself to be in the wrong in proposing her, let me know, in common fairness, on what grounds my offence is based. Why is Mrs. Theobald notoriously ineligible?"

"Simply because she is not visited in the county. Your own good sense, your own good taste, might supply you with that answer."

"The answer is no answer. You make up your minds, all of you, not to visit A., B., or C.; and then, when you are asked what her crime is, you say, 'Oh, she is not visited.' Is this justice, is this honesty?"

"Rawdon," says Mrs. Crosbie, chillingly, "I am in no humour for hair-splitting. You have acted, I am willing to hope and believe, under evil influence, and in a manner that you yourself, a few years hence, will be the first to condemn. Hear what our relative, hear what dear Alfred Hervey, a man of the world, a man accustomed to the highest rank of society, thinks about it."

"I have heard, mother. No number of years, I hope, will ever bring me to the way of thinking of Alfred Hervey."

"Acting under evil influences, I repeat, you have foolishly betrayed your father and me and all of us into a most painful, I might say a most lowering, position! You must very well know, Rawdon, your ignorance of common decency can not be so great but that you must very well know the Lidlington Croquet Club can never admit the person you have proposed as a member?"

For a minute or two Rawdon makes no answer. "I don't seek to change your opinions, mother," he breaks forth at last. "Blackball Mrs. Theobald, taboo her, persecute her as you like—it is no business of mine. One thing only I think I may fairly ask you before the subject is done with for ever." For ever! The green ribbons flutter up suddenly; and Emma looks, very full and steadily, at her lover. "*What* is the charge brought against her? I have listened to a great many hints, I have seen a great many shakes of the head, from the day when we mistook her for the Princess Czartoriska in Spa till now. I have never heard one fair above-board statement yet. *What* is Mrs. Theobald's crime? Why is she not to be visited? Why is she not to be a member of the Lidlington Croquet Club?"

"Do you wish a subject of this nature to be discussed in Emma's presence, sir?"

"Most certainly I do. Why not?"

"Well, then, in the first place, Mr. Franci Theobald's wife does not belong by birth to the same station of life as ourselves."

"Birth! And Mrs. Coventry Brown is the leader of the Lidlington society."

"Her ideas, her habits, her associations must be . . . fast! I detest the word, Rawdon, but you oblige me, you oblige me to use it."

Rawdon Crosbie on this looks straight into his mother's face; then he bursts into a laugh. "Fast! Mrs. Theobald fast! Mother, let me ask you who at the present time is the most-sought-after woman throughout the length and breadth of Chalkshire? Who dines everywhere, from the Archdeacon's upwards and downwards? Whose name have we vainly tried to get at the head of our croquet list? Who is the show-guest at our little entertainments? To whose table do we move heaven and earth to obtain an invitation? Visiting Lady Rose Golightly, associating with her, courting her, as we do, have we the right—I put it to you, mother, as a question of abstract justice—the right to condemn any woman upon the bare supposition of her being fast?"

Just for one instant Mrs. Crosbie does not find a fitting answer come readily to her lips. Emma, who is at all times beautifully superior to argument, hastens to her relief.

"We must take the world as we find it, mamma. Major Hervey said so this morning. Every one in the county knows Lady Rose Golightly, and no one in the county knows Mrs. Theobald. What has abstract justice got to do with people's visiting lists? I suppose Rawdon thinks we ought to set ourselves above the Archdeacon and every respectable person in the neighbourhood!"

"It would be a hard matter, my dear Emma, to know what Rawdon does think," says Mrs. Crosbie, with cold dignity. "But it is not at all a hard matter to know how this quixotic championship of unpopular persons must end. I am far from accusing Rawdon of anything as yet but boyish folly; but folly beyond a certain point becomes guilt—yes, Rawdon, guilt!" And Mrs. Crosbie's voice trembles; her eyes fill. "And now, to-day, while there is still time, and here in our dear Emma's presence, I ask you to draw back from an acquaintance—I fear I must say an intimacy—which can only end in discredit and unhappiness to us all!"

With true maternal instinct she has made the very most that can be made of the situation. In argument the advantage is wholly on Rawdon's side: recriminations, anger, are thrown away upon him: at this sudden softening of his mother's tone, at this first sign of tears, this first quiver of her lips, all his boyish heart gives way! He made himself Mrs. Theobald's champion in the beginning more from a freak of obstinacy than of set purpose. That he has gradually fallen away from the narrow path, from his plighted word to Emma, ever since, his conscience knows only too well. And horribly sharp is the prick conscience gives him at this moment.

"I came here half an hour ago, mother, prepared to ask Emma to forgive me, prepared to tell you how annoyed I was about—about the way we met last night. If you had let me see you at once, instead of putting me through a homily from Major Hervey, matters might have been sooner mended, perhaps."

"I don't see that at all!" cries Emma, suddenly sitting very upright, and putting down her smelling bottle. "Oh, mamma, indeed you must let me speak now, please. It is very easy for Rawdon to talk in that airy kind of way, about matters being mended sooner, and to sneer at Major Hervey for his advice. Major Hervey has been most kind, and I value his opinion most highly. Major Hervey would not have excused himself from escorting us to the theatre on a paltry pretext, and then have gone to a public supper-room—and anyone, Freddy Pippin, or anyone from Chalkshire, might have been there and seen you—with a creature like that!"

The scorn, the emphasis with which Emma brings out this deadliest epithet of her vocabulary is startling.

"Alfred Hervey," observes Mrs. Crosbie, suavely, "is a Man of the World, my dear Emma. Alfred knows the value of etiquette, as Rawdon will have to learn it in time. My dear, dear old uncle, your godpapa, sir, Canon Hervey, used to say that good manners are the small-change of good morals. 'In our transitory state we have not time, we have not wisdom,' the venerable man used to say, 'to decide, on the spur of the moment, whether any intended action be intrinsically *right*. We can always say to ourselves, Is it usual, for persons moving in a certain refined sphere of life, to do so-and-so? And we shall rarely, if ever, find ourselves misled in the result.'"

"Mrs. Theobald herself is bad enough in all conscience," cries Emma, appositely. "Mrs. Theobald has only to move her head or open her lips for you to see what she is. But the other person—with the dreadful painted eyes, and covered with cheap trash, and the rouge *evident*, and I heard her call you 'Rawdon!' Yes, though my back was turned, I heard her call you 'Rawdon!'"

Poor Emma's voice chokes as she recalls this crowning enormity on the part of Rawdon's companion—she lifts her handkerchief once more to her eyes; and Mrs. Crosbie steals discreetly from the room. And now comes the real tug of war, the crucial test of courage for young Rawdon.

"The 'other person,' Emma, of whom you speak in such strong language, is Mrs. Theobald's sister, Miss Minnie Arundel, a poor little, very hard-working, very unpretending actress. The world of an uneducated girl like this is not your world——"

"You may well say that, I think!"

"Her ideas of conventional propriety are not yours. Perhaps it would be correcter to say that she has no ideas of conventional propriety at all. I was introduced to Miss Arundel at rehearsal for the first time yesterday afternoon, and I think about two minutes after my introduction to her she called me by my Christian name."

"And what business had you to be introduced to any Miss Arundels, pray? And how, as your engagements would not let you come to

Bolton Row till six, had you time to go to all these horrid rehearsals, and theatres, and things?"

Rawdon hesitates. He has determined to set himself straight with his betrothed, so far as this setting straight may be accomplished by absolute truth-telling. But absolute truth-telling is no such easy task he finds now that it has to be put into practice.

"One can never exactly say how anything happens in this world, Emmy. I met Mrs. Theobald, and she was going to call for her sister at the Royal, and——"

"Spare yourself all this, Rawdon!" cries Emma, with rising passion. "You used to meet Mrs. Theobald, accidently perhaps, day after day in Chalkshire. It is possible. I will allow that it is possible. You could not have met her accidentally in the streets of London. Of *her* want of principle and of right feeling in trying to entrap the attentions of an engaged man, I won't speak. Thank heaven, I have nothing to do, even in idea, with such women! But you, Rawdon—yes, for the time has come when I mean to speak in plainest language—you must make your choice between your present associates and me!"

"Emma——"

"If I were your wife I would bear your neglect in silence, and as duty bade me." And in saying this Emma really believes herself to be uttering the truth. "But I am not your wife. My duty, thank heaven, is to myself only still; and I repeat, you will have to make your choice between your present associates and me!"

She stops, fairly out of breath; her brow liberally moistened with agitation; the green ribbons standing up on end; her swollen pink eyes fixed angrily upon her lover's face. Never, it must be confessed, has Emmy looked less lovely in Rawdon's sight than at this moment; never has the contrast seemed sharper than between her and Jane!

Jane. . . He thinks of her as she stood last night, her lip trembling, her fair face kindling, as she made use of nearly the same words as Emma is using now—the same words, but with what a difference of tone and spirit!

"You have to make your choice, and there can't be a question as to where your choice must lie. Do what you know to be right, and forget that there is such a person as Jane Theobald in the world."

A desperate resolve comes upon him to take his betrothed at her word; free himself at any cost; say one bitter good-bye; for the last time hear Jane Theobald's voice, feel the clasp of Jane Theobald's hand; then emigrate—to California, Tasmania—to any place where engagements, marriage, and all other social difficulties may be escaped from! But just at this point Emma gives a convulsive sniff, and once more arms herself with the handkerchief and salts-bottle, and Rawdon's better angel touches his heart again.

In this engagement of his he does not stand, it must be remembered, in the position of most engaged men. Emma Marsland—dear, good, little, plain, long-suffering Emma—was his sister until the last few mistaken weeks that she has become his sweetheart. Emma to Rawdon Crosbie really means home, father, mother; everything in the world the lad holds dear—save one thing. There is something monstrous in the idea of any lasting quarrel between him and the poor child whose love for him has been as the love of a spaniel for its master from the day when she first ran, panting, after his cricket-balls, and stuck fish-hooks into her patient, little, stupid, fat fingers in vain attempts at making flies!

"You take things altogether too seriously, Emmy. You must get out of this habit of making mountains from molehills! Just because of that ridiculous meeting we all had last night—it was very ridiculous, Emma, confess it—to talk about my 'choosing' between you and any one! On your word of honour, now, in cold blood, do you mean to tell me you would be glad to have your freedom back?"

All this time he has been standing, frigid and distant, a couple of yards or more away from her. He comes close now, and stoops until his lips are very near Miss Marsland's cheek. Her breath comes thick and fast; her easily-agitated heart begins to palpitate. Never has the affectionate little heiress loved Rawdon better than at this moment of acutest jealousy! And still she is stubborn—will not retrograde one inch from the position which she feels (which Major Hervey has taught her to feel) dignity and self-respect require her to hold.

"I don't know what you mean by talk about 'my freedom.' Do you think I should have written all the way to Mr. Mason in Jamaica unless I had known my own mind? Have back my freedom, indeed! And the wedding-dresses bought, and bridesmaids settled on—yes, and even the lockets; and to think of what the Pippins will say—actually writing such a letter to mamma about her! and, of course, they talk to everybody in the same way, for I have always thought them most ill-natured, in spite of all that friendly manner; and now you begin to talk coolly about 'freedom'? Oh! if the case was reversed; if you wanted *me* to give anybody up; if you were to say, 'Don't flirt with So-and-so, or So-and-so,' do you think I should not feel it a duty and a pleasure to obey you?"

The illustration, considering the slender amount of attention Emmy ordinarily meets with, is not, perhaps, a forcible one; but Rawdon makes the most of it.

"If engaged people were to quarrel every time either was amused with anybody else, their existence would not be a very lively affair. Suppose I chose to be jealous of Adonis Hervey, for instance! Adonis has scarcely been away from your side since the day you came to London. You were much more engrossed by him last night than I was by Miss Arundel. Come, Emma, confess that you were."

"It is not a question at all of Miss Arundel, except that I am sorry for your taste in being seen with such a Creature!" cries Emma, keeping Rawdon well to the point, however discursive she may be herself. "It is a question of Mrs. Theobald. Do you mean to give Mrs. Theobald up, Rawdon, or do you not?"

"'Give up' a lady who has a husband, home, child, already, and who cares about as much for me as I do for . . . Mrs. Pippin! Do be reasonable, Emma. Do reflect a little on the absurdity of what you are saying."

"I am perfectly reasonable, and I have reflected well over everything. Will you give up calling at the Theobalds' house when you are in Chalkshire? If you meet her at any time, or in any place, and I am with you, will you pass by without recognising her? That is what I want to know."

"Emma," answers Rawdon—but he draws away from her, he takes his former frigid attitude as he speaks; "do you think you are acting generously, fairly; acting as one woman should towards another in making that request? I—I"—oh, how horribly hard it is to him to say this!—"know that my acquaintance, such as it is, with the Theobalds, cannot continue on its present footing. You have decided, between you, God knows why! that Mrs. Theobald shall not be visited, and if you wish it, I shall, of course, have no choice but to leave off calling at their house."

"If I wish it! As though there could be a doubt on the subject."

"It matters little whether there is or not, Emma," cries Rawdon, waxing hot. "After what occurred last night, the deliberately insulting manner that my mother and all of you thought fit to put on, there would be precious little chance of my being admitted at Theobalds if I did call. Mrs. Theobald herself has told me that much."

"Has she, indeed? Excessive impertinence, I consider it, on her part, towards the whole family, then," says Emma, colouring scarlet.

"You think so, after the treatment she has received from the whole family during the past three weeks? However, this is beside the question. As far as I am concerned, I can promise, with the most perfect safety, never to bring Mrs. Theobald and you into any sort or kind of collision again."

"And you will never call at their house, and if you meet her when you are with me in Chalkshire, or anywhere else, you will not bow!"

Rawdon turns sharply round from Miss Marsland; and in doing so confronts the reflection of his own flushed, horribly-perplexed face in a mirror between the windows. Was ever man, he asks himself, in so humiliating a strait as this? What *is* a man to do, what *do* men do, when feminine jealousy presses them thus hard?

His knowledge of life is sufficiently wide to tell him that if all wives and sweethearts exact such reasonless promises as Emma seeks to exact now, a considerable number of men must be under the necessity of perjuring themselves. Is perjury, in matters pertaining to love and ladies, to be counted dishonour? A deliberate falsehood to man has Rawdon Crosbie never uttered yet. A good many little white lies his mother and Emma have of late forced him into telling. Shall another one, rather bigger, rather less white, perhaps, than its predecessors, be added to the number?

"You seem to require a long time to consider a most simple matter," says Emma, not, perhaps, in her sweetest tone. "What in the world can you be deliberating about? Is 'yes' such a very difficult word to speak?"

"To such a question as you have asked me I think it is a very difficult word to speak?"

"Then I can tell you, Rawdon, that you stand quite alone in your opinion. Mrs. Hervey, and Alfred Hervey, and everybody consider that I am perfectly justified, under the circumstances, in requiring that your acquaintance with the Theobalds shall come, at once and for ever, to an end."

After this Rawdon Crosbie softens no more. He turns, he looks, I must say with no particularly lover-like expression, straight into Miss Marsland's face.

"Mrs. Hervey, Major Hervey, and everybody! You have been holding a delightful family conclave, then, upon my conduct, and the fitting punishment to be awarded me?"

"I don't know what you mean by a family conclave. Major Hervey saw how dreadfully hurt I was last night, and came home with us, although he was engaged to two different balls, and stayed till nearly two o'clock, talking. He was here directly after breakfast again to-day, and I'm sure has said everything that is nice and considerate to mamma and me."

"And he advised you what terms you should dictate to me, Emma? Let us have the truth out."

"Major Hervey has been excessively kind and considerate," says Emma, rather doggedly. "Whatever opinions he gave about your conduct were given with the greatest delicacy and forbearance."

"And he considers you justified in asking me to break off my acquaintance at once and for ever with the Theobalds?"

"Most decidedly he does."

"Very well, then, Emma. You have thought fit to consult Major Hervey on a matter that concerns you and me alone; Major Hervey, I have no doubt, has prepared you for the probable result. I will not, under any pressure whatsoever, break off my acquaintance with the Theobalds, either in Chalkshire or elsewhere. And wherever and whenever I may meet Mrs. Theobald, I shall hold myself only too much honoured if she will condescend to notice me."

"This—this is quite sufficient!" cries Emma, starting to her feet. "We need have no more discussion. From this moment forth everything is at an end between us."

"That is as you like," says Rawdon. "If you choose to give me up because I refuse to

offer a gratuitous insult to a perfectly innocent woman——"

"Innocent!"

"Yes, innocent! By heavens!" getting hotter and hotter, "and not only so, but honester, truer, better in every way, than half the people you and my mother court as associates; if you feel yourself justified in breaking off our engagement for such a cause as this, do it. You will, at least, have the good opinion, the delicate sense of honour, the worldly knowledge of Major Hervey to support you!"

An hysterical sob, a whole crescendo passage of hysterical sobs from Miss Marsland, conclude the scene. Enters Mrs. Crosbie, with a conciliatory, well-timed speech. Enters Maria Hervey, with a vinaigrette. Adonis, languidly repressing the chronic yawn, appears on the staircase; and Rawdon, uncertain whether he is the most miserable or the happiest man alive, rushes, without uttering a word of explanation or farewell, past them all, and from the house.

CHAPTER XXVII

BLACKBALLED

A LIBERAL handful of active envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness does undoubtedly leaven every human community. And still it is but a handful. The majority, the careless, forward-pressing majority of the world, are indifferent towards every man and woman who does not actually jostle their elbows or tread on their toes in the crowd. Let Jews, Turks, Heretics, unvisited people of all grades and degrees, take what comfort they may from the thought.

During the past five days Rawdon Crosbie's audacity in proposing Mrs. Theobald as a member of the Lidlington Croquet Club, the laxity of the Reverend Samuel Smylie in becoming her seconder, have been canvassed with angry heat by some few persons, intimate friends, mostly, of the Crosbie family. Society at large has felt only a mild and lukewarm interest in the subject. "Rawdon Crosbie running after this young Mrs. Theobald!—not very much to be wondered at, under the circumstances, is it?"

"Ah, well, I don't know. Miss Marsland is a most amiable girl, and over head and ears in love with him."

"Yes, but her freckles! And poor Mrs. Crosbie's way of bringing him up has been so sadly ill-judged. You really cannot, in these days, keep a young man for ever in leading-strings."

"Someone told a lady, who told the rector, who spoke of it to my sister, that Mrs. Theobald stands a good chance of being blackballed."

"Not very flattering to the Miss Theobalds. But pride, even spiritual pride, deserves a fall."

"And not very flattering to Mr. Smylie. By-the-by, have you heard that he is decidedly ritualistic?"

"And engaged to this London friend of Lady Rose Golightly's! She looks old enough to be his mother, and fast . . . why, my dear, if one may believe half they say——"

And so on. Some people have heard, vaguely, that Jane stands a chance of being blackballed. One or two may have made up their minds how they shall individually vote. A few old women, of both sexes, have daily cackled at unofficial meetings called together in Mrs. Pippin's drawing-room. The world at large has not taken the trouble to think on the subject at all; perhaps, if closely questioned, would tell you that blackballing, of its very nature, is a mistake; and that of two evils, to admit a doubtful candidate to a croquet club—"particularly as croquet is an out-of-door game"—may be the least.

Such is the inchoate or jelly-like state of public feeling when Mrs. Crosbie and Emma return to Chalkshire on Friday night. By noon next day—Mrs. Pippin, Mrs. Crosbie, and other notabilities having met in the interval—public feeling has become organised; uncertainty nourished into determination.

Rawdon Crosbie committed a grievous act of folly, no doubt, about that—a grievous act of folly in nominating such a person at all; but Mrs. Crosbie distinctly states that he did it under *undue pressure*. And Rawdon Crosbie is but a boy! Now, the thing to decide is, what will be right (putting all small feeling aside) for the club to do? Christian charity . . . ah, it will be much more really charitable to exclude her, poor thing; she would never have a creature to speak to on the ground. And one must draw a line—that's the real fact, my dear Mrs. Grundy, one must draw a line somewhere. If you admit a candidate of the stamp of this Mrs. Francis Theobald, whom will you not admit?

On Thursday night the chances were about twenty-five to one in Jane's favour. By noon on Friday they are even. As the afternoon draws on it is no longer a matter of uncertainty at all.

Only, for the Miss Theobald's sake, and considering the circumstances of the nomination, a clergyman's name mixed up in it, too, let there be no blackballing! This is Mrs. Crosbie's advice. As the hour for the ballot approaches let every member of the club, by tacit understanding, have an engagement elsewhere and leave the field. Mrs. Pippin has kindly volunteered a five o'clock tea, with music. Charming! Let us all be engaged to Mrs. Pippin's five o'clock tea. The ballot will fall through, simply from want of balloting members, and Mrs. Theobald can be apprised, in a perfectly polite and lady-like note—not that she has been blackballed, but that, from unforeseen circumstances, the field was empty at the usual hour for balloting, and her election did not take place. Depend upon it, after one such hint as this she will never seek to put herself forward again.

And Mrs. Crosbie, being a really popular

woman, as well as a clever tactician, it is decided that her advice shall be acted on.

Most of the Lidlington ladies, young and old, are sure, now they have seriously thought things over, that they would sooner banish Jane's pretty face from their own hunting-grounds than not. At the same time they would rather effect her banishment by a covert than by an open blow. Which of us would not sooner dispatch an enemy by Sidney Smith's plan—ring a nice clean-handled little bell, which shall cause him to drop down dead in Japan—than by such disgusting, open-handed means of destruction as a pistol or poison? No blackballing; only a five o'clock tea, with music, at Mrs. Pippin's; and a polite, lady-like note to acquaint the victim with her fate. It must be acknowledged that Mrs. Crosbie has lighted upon a most delicate and yet efficient way of helping the club and its members out of their difficulties.

But whoever, in Lidlington society, acts without Mrs. Coventry Brown acts without his host! Driving, majestic, through the town, in her gorgeous carriage, with its gorgeous liveries, a gorgeous parasol uplifted over her big white face and rose-decked bonnet—driving, majestic, I say, as is her Saturday afternoon wont, through the town of Lidlington, Mrs. Coventry Brown is stopped by some stragglers from the croquet-ground, on their way to Mrs. Pippin's high tea and music, and learns what is going on.

"An excellent idea of Mrs. Crosbie's—exclude a person, not generally visited, from the club, and yet spare the members the painful onus of blackballing!"

Mrs. Coventry Brown looks upon the idea as contemptible. Why, pray, should a club, more than an individual, shirk a positive dooty? Nothing, in a case of this kind, like striking one good, decisive blow—taking the bull by the 'orns. As for Mrs. General Pippin putting herself forward to give an impromptu five o'clock tea, all Mrs. Coventry Brown has to say is that she considers it, personally, in the light of a direct and intentional impertinence. The Pippins have been invited to her house to dinners, luncheons, evening parties, times out of mind. Well, she expects no return. She knows what the Pippins' means are. An Indian General's widow, and only two female servants kept, and the Miss Pippins make, or more often *turn*, their own dresses. Still, when the Pippins do give an entertainment, however humble, not to go through the form—the form of inviting their best friends, is to display their own ignorance. Mrs. Coventry Brown would not have gone had she been asked. Nothing more painful to Mrs. Coventry Brown than to feel that you are depriving a family of *necessities* with every mouthful of cake you eat. Oh, dear no! not for worlds would she have gone; but for the Pippins' sakes, she wished they had shown the common decency and gratitude to have asked her. What she will do is—drive to the club croquet-ground, and, with her own hand, put in a blackball for Mrs. Theobald. Mrs. Crosbie, and every other member of the Lidlington Croquet Club, may hold their shilly shally opinions as to right and wrong. Mrs. Coventry Brown holds hers, and acts upon them: will keep out doubtful characters from every section of society over which she has control. Much has been given her—much is expected of her; much it is her bounden "dooty" to perform. She goes to the croquet-ground, with a sense of righteous pleasure tingling at her very finger-ends, puts in her blackball, and actually walks twice up and down the hot pavement of Lidlington High Street, for the sake of publishing what she has done, afterwards.

And so, when Jane and her husband return home late that evening, Jane learns her fate. No cards, no invitations lie on her table, as might be the case were she a visited woman, a Lady Rose Golightly, after a six days' absence; only a business-like letter, written in Mrs. Crosbie's clearest hand, every "t" crossed, every "i" dotted, and containing a short, cuttingly polite statement as to the result of the ballot.

"She must have been a little goose ever to put herself in the power of all those old dragonesses! But she is a goose! These pink-and-white sort of women always are. You should have had more discretion, Mr. Smylie, than to become her seconder."

Lady Rose Golightly speaks; Loo Childers and Mr. Smylie listen. It is nine o'clock in the evening: the hour, this July time, for coffee on The Folly terrace. Lady Rose and Loo, in their Charles II. dinner-dresses, look extremely picturesque in the becoming half light, reclining back in the easiest of all garden chairs, and each with a porcelain coffee-cup in her hand. A heightened tint (of rouge, or emotion, which?) is on Lady Rose's sallow cheeks; she has her chair placed so that she can watch the side-entrance to the gardens—the entrance at which anyone walking over from the direction of Theobalds to pay an evening visit at The Folly would be sure to ring.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Smylie," adds Loo. "And then, after putting yourself forward as her seconder, not to have the moral courage to vote for her! So like a par . . . I beg your pardon. You know, I never did care for anything ecclesiastical before you. Honestly, now, why did you not defy all the bigotry and virtue of Lidlington, and go and vote for poor Mrs. Theobald this afternoon?"

Mr. Smylie answers, looking a good deal ashamed of himself, that he thought it best to be guided by the opinions of his friends. Mrs. Pippin—a very motherly person, Mrs. Pippin—warned him that he had gone too far already. The rector advised him to spend the afternoon by visiting some of his outlying parishioners across the common.

"And you listened to them? Well, well—

'He who fights and runs away.' No doubt you showed the better part of valour, Mr. Smylie," says Lady Rose. "I wonder, if the Lidlington croquet people had you and me in their power, Loo, whether Mr. Smylie would have courage enough to brave public opinion and save us from being blackballed?"

"There would be so much chance of Lady Rose Golightly's being blackballed!" says the curate, rather subserviently. "The complaint of the Lidlington croquet-players is that they have never yet had the honour of putting Lady Rose's name at the head of their list of members."

"Next to the Venerable the Archdeacon's lady, and two above Mrs. Coventry Brown. No, I don't aspire to such big capitals. When I come into the country it is for quiet meditation, not social distinction. Social distinction!" repeats Lady Rose, in a tone that 'tis pity none of the Chalkshire magnates can hear. "Yes, to think of the absurd presumption of these people in blackballing anyone! I should say Mr. Theobald's wife is just as good in every respect, social or otherwise, as any of the rest."

"She certainly is better-looking," remarks the vacillating Smylie.

"Mr. Smylie! I am shocked and surprised at your levity," cries Loo, with an air of admonition. "I was talking to a lady to-day (I mention no names, your own conscience may tell you who it was—a very nice old lady, the mamma of many daughters), and she told us—did she not, Rose? —that the parishioners think seriously of sending a round-robin about you to the bishop. A horrid whisper is abroad that Miss Marsland's engagement to that poor little Artillery boy is broken off, *apropos* of Mrs. Theobald. The next thing we shall hear is that the Reverend Samuel Smylie is to be sequestrated—I believe that is the right term?—for a like cause."

"Yes, I think so much of Mrs. Theobald—of anything but——"

Mr. Smylie gets into such an agony of blushing that Loo, out of sheer compassion, comes to his relief.

"Of anything but paying visits at The Folly, I suppose? You certainly don't do much besides, just at present. Well, I am not sure that that betters your condition. Scylla or Charybdis—The Folly or Theobalds—which should you say was the lesser danger for Mr. Smylie, Rose?"

A ring comes at the garden gate as Miss Childers speaks; a deeper colour—it cannot have been rouge, after all—rises to Lady Rose's cheek. Loo Childers puts down her coffee-cup on the small garden-table that stands between the two ladies, and discovers suddenly that she feels chilly, and must return to the drawing-room for her shawl.

The curate accompanies her. (They are lovers, lawfully plighted, let me hasten to explain. Mr. Smylie's conduct is above suspicion. "As soon as ever you get a bishopric I promise faithfully to marry you," Loo has told him. "Indeed, when you become dean, if you are a very rich and flourishing sort of dean, I don't say that we may not begin to buy our furniture.") Another minute and Francis Theobald is at Lady Rose's side.

He has been absent six days, and she is glad—eagerly glad—to see him, and shows it. He takes the chair left vacant by Miss Childers. Fresh coffee, with its attendant *chasse*, is brought out upon the terrace; and then, at Lady Rose's bidding, Mr. Theobald lights his cigarette, and begins gradually to feel happy.

When he left home, Jane, not yet recovered from Mrs. Crosbie's note, was in one of her fine, hot, outspoken bad tempers; Blossy fractious after the journey. The cook, only half-expecting them, had given them greasy mutton-chops for dinner; and nothing unhinges Francis Theobald's moral nature like greasy mutton-chops. The old house, unduly shut up during the past week, was smelling more like a mushroom-bed, and less like a human habitation than ever. What a contrast with everything about Lady Rose's well-appointed, quiet, luxurious little household! Theobald feels fonder of Lady Rose herself than he has ever felt since the renewal of their acquaintance, out of pure gratitude for his own personal refreshment.

"And so you and Barty have become fast friends again, I hear," she remarks. The lawfully-engaged lovers show no disposition to re-appear; and Theobald and his hostess are thus forced into one of those dual solitudes which, of a summer's night, and with a cigarette, and good coffee, and an easy-chair, are really not unpleasant. "You will be able to renew your acquaintance with Arthur soon. He is to be in Chalkshire for the races—at least I conclude so. Arthur never writes; but our friend Mrs. Crosbie tells me the race-stewards have 'taken the liberty of advertising his Grace's patronage.' By-the-by, Mr. Theobald, how glad I am that you are to be one of this party on board the 'Laïs'!"

"Am I to be one of the party on board the 'Laïs'?" asks Mr. Theobald.

"So Barty says. I heard from him to-day, and, as far as it is possible to decipher one of Barty's scrawls, I make out that you have promised to join us all at Cowes the first week in August."

"Lord Barty was kind enough to ask me when I saw him in London," answers Theobald; "but as to my promising—Lady Rose, I never promise anything. All my views of life are short. I hold that for a married man there is no such thing as a future. He may propose——"

"But his wife disposes," interrupts Lady Rose, with her little bitter laugh. "So I am told. My own experience of marriage is too limited to allow me to generalise. Without promising, then, as promising is against your principles, you have some weak and vacillating intention of joining our party on board the 'Laïs' at Cowes?"

Mr. Theobald holds his cigarette at arm's-length, and looks at it attentively through his short-sighted handsome grey eyes. He knows

pretty clearly what poor Jenny's notions are on the subject of married men entering society into which their wives do not enter. In his heart he more than half believes poor Jenny to have right on her side. Still, Francis Theobald, weak though he be in many things, is a man of tolerably strong will on points that involve his own personal gratification; and the vision of the 'Laïs,' and of the kind of people Lord Barty Beaudesert will be likely to collect together on board the 'Laïs,' is not, I must admit, an altogether unpleasing one to his mind.

"I can understand a wife not liking her husband to go to ladies' parties without her," cries Lady Rose, divining his thoughts—divining the cause of his hesitation. "If I—if I—" (pathetically) "had married differently, I daresay I might have felt the same. My life has put me out of the way—alas!—of all common jealousy. But a thing I cannot understand is, a wife quarrelling with bachelor parties; and Barty's are purely bachelor parties. Loo and I come across them sometimes by accident, as we mean to do now, but they are bachelor parties still. What can a woman expect who will not let her husband associate with men?—that he shall sit at home and embroider slippers or what?"

"I have never embroidered slippers yet," says Theobald, with undisturbed composure; "but I daresay it would be nice employment for wet days. I must ask Jenny to buy me some needles and canvas."

That one word "Jenny," the tone in which it is spoken, makes Lady Rose Golightly quiver as with a sudden bodily pain. Can it—can it be possible that this man, with his refined tastes, his remembrance of better things, can be faithful at heart to the low-born girl whom he degraded himself by marrying? Faithful! Lady Rose has been nurtured, theoretically and practically, in a school that knows not the meaning of the word in connection with the love of man for woman. Francis Theobald has sufficient pride to speak with kindness of his wife, and to seem, at least, to defer to his wife's wishes. Well, the weakness is amiable! Lady Rose shifts her tactics.

"I half hoped Mrs. Theobald would have walked round with you to The Folly this evening; but I did not ask her to do so in my note." My note? Then the call is not unpremeditated. "I know Mrs. Theobald hates cards, and some of the people from the Fort are coming in to have a little *écarté* by-and-by. I mean, one of these days, to have a party expressly for Mrs. Theobald, with no gambling allowed. Talking of gambling, if you do go down to Cowes beware of Barty's loo and lansquenet! He tells me Harry Desmond and little Lord Verreker are to be there; and we all know what that means! The very atmosphere of the 'Laïs' is a demoralisation to people with gambling propensities."

The suggestion is well-timed, the bait cleverly thrown out. Curious with what aptitude some of these shallow but tortuous women—and when you pierce through her veneer of artificial liveliness, artificial sentiment, artificial everything, Lady Rose is radically shallow—curious, I say, how the shallowest women can acutely gauge and play upon every weakness of the man who moves their fancy for the hour. Straightforward, full-hearted Jane, with the intuitions of love itself to guide her, cannot make the same good use of her husband's foibles that Lady Rose can. Imagine Jane, even to keep him out of a rival's reach, allying herself to the seductions of loo and lansquenet!

"Then, as I have decided gambling propensities, the best thing for me will be to steer as clear of the 'Laïs' as I can," says Theobald, "unless, indeed, you will solemnly promise to take care of me, Lady Rose."

Lady Rose's hand, her one beauty untouched by time, happens to rest on the back of M Theobald's chair. He turns towards her as he speaks, and his lips are only a few inches away from the soft little white fingers, and a certain diamond ring that gleams and sparkles in the uncertain light.

"And if I do promise," she asks, almost in a whisper—"if I do undertake the tremendous responsibility of looking after your morals, you will go?"

"Well, the question is, would Lady Rose's presence on board the 'Laïs,' or anywhere else, make my safety certain?" says Mr. Theobald, in his half-tender, half-sarcastic voice—the voice which, after all, Reader, has been the one true note of music in this woman of fashion' hideously unmusical life!

She hesitates; she gives a quick-drawn sigh. To sigh effectively is an accomplishment requiring much experience and much practice. Lady Rose Golightly has had both, and does it well. She falters. "Yes—no. Everything depends, does it not, upon what one means by safety?"

And then her tone softens abruptly; the diamond on the small white hand flashes closer before Francis Theobald's near-sighted eyes, and both are silent.

"We must take the world as we find it," said Emma, with wisdom learnt from an Adonis Hervey. "Everyone in the county knows Lady Rose Golightly, and no one in the county knows Mrs. Theobald. What has abstract justice got to do with people's visiting lists?"

Not very much, it must be confessed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALONE

A fortnight passes on, and the blow struck by Mrs. Coventry Brown proves, as she predicted it would prove, a decisive one. "The bull has been taken by the 'orns" to some effect.

There had been a vague feeling in the neighbourhood, before, that Francis Theobald's wife

into her husband's unruffled face. "I'm glad to hear The Folly dinners give you so little gratification. You'll be the less angry with me for what I am going to do. Theobald," taking a couple of envelopes from her pocket, "I got a note this morning from Lady Golightly. You know its contents, probably? Well, and I've written my answer. Shall I read it to you?"

"It might make things clearer to my understanding, my love, if you were to let me hear the question first; but just as you like."

"Do you mean to tell me, on your word of honour, you don't know what her note is about?"

"Have I ever shown symptoms of possessing the gift of clairvoyance, Jenny?"

"Do you, or do you not?"

Mr. Theobald puts up his eyeglass to look at nothing in particular, and stands the picture of a bullied, innocent husband.

"Do I, or do I not? Jenny, if I were to be killed for it at this moment, I couldn't answer that question. Do I, or do I not—what?"

"I will save you the trouble of thinking. It will be a pity for you to fatigue your brains about such a trifle! This is her note—though, in spite of all you say, yes, and if you were to say fifty times as much, I will never believe, intimate as you are, that you have not read it already, perhaps dictated it—I believe you dictated it:—

"'My dear Mrs. Theobald,

"'Will you and Mr. Theobald dine with me on Monday at eight? We shall be quite a small party; and, knowing your predilections, I mean the rule of the evening to be, "No cards."

"'I am, yours truly,

"'Rose Golightly.'"

"It is a friendly enough note in its way," says Francis Theobald.

"And here is my answer:

"'Mrs. Theobald does not accept Lady Rose Golightly's invitation to dinner.'"

For a moment Theobald stands like a man who has had a blow. His nonchalance, his look of innocence, both take flight; an ominous, deep flush spreads gradually over his face. "You have no intention of *sending* that note, I presume, Jane?"

"What should I have written it for, else? I shall walk over to Lidlington, and post it with my own hands this afternoon."

"You will commit the unwisest action of your life if you do. Refuse Lady Rose's invitation if you like—the only woman," adds Mr. Theobald, actually beginning to lose his temper, "the only woman in this—blanked neighbourhood who has shown you a civility; but refuse it with common politeness. Why, that note is the note of a madwoman!"

Never since she was married to him has Jane seen such energy on Theobald's face, heard such energy in his voice.

"Mad—you think me mad, do you? Then all I have got to say on the subject is, I very much prefer my own madness to the sanity of other people."

"Jenny, you are a foolish, hot-headed girl, but you will never do such a thing as this. I don't want you to accept Lady Rose's invitation. I would rather, on every account, you did not accept it. Stay away—I'll stay away too, if you choose; but put your refusal into decent terms. That is all I ask of you."

Now a woman, jealous though she might be, who possessed tact, discretion, the commonest worldly prudence, would certainly here yield the point to the extent urged by Mr. Theobald. But tact, discretion, prudence, are not among Jane's virtues. She sees how deeply Theobald, usually so indifferent to all things, is in earnest, and forms deductions in her own quick, unreasoning fashion as to the earnestness of his regard for Lady Rose.

"You are wonderfully anxious to spare her feelings, it seems. How much have you thought of sparing mine during the past fortnight?"

"All this is simple childishness, Jane. We were not married yesterday that you should cry if you lose me out of your sight. Besides," goes on Theobald, losing his coolness more and more, "you are really the last woman living who should be touchy in such small matters! When did I find fault with your intimacy with De Lansac—Brabazon—young Crosbie—with scores of other men you have had dangling in attendance upon you at different times?"

Jane colours over brow, cheek, and neck; then she turns white with passion. "Rawdon Crosbie—Brabazon! And you dare—you dare liken my intimacy with them, with any man, to yours with Lady Rose? Do you degrade me, even in your own mind, then, to the level of fine ladies? Oh, I have looked into Lady Rose's eyes, I have heard her and her friend Miss Childers talk; I know what fine ladies are! Do you degrade me, even in your own mind, I say, to such a level as that?"

In truth he does not. The shot, discharged at random, has struck home. In this poor ballet-girl, whom he took, at sixteen years old, to be his wife—this ballet-girl, with

"Her unromantic style, her ungrammatical lips,"

Theobald has trust most absolute—trust such as men do not always have, it may be, in far better born, more highly educated wives. Jane unfaithful!—Jane, with all her tempers, and jealousies, and ignorance, upon a level with Loo Childers and Lady Rose?

"As to De Lansac," she goes on, "I blush—I blush for you that you should bring his name into such a discussion. Why, but for his generosity——"

"Yes, I know, I know," cries Theobald, not looking by any means at his ease. "For heaven's sake, Jane, don't let us have any theatre scenes of 'powerful domestic interest!' You know quite well I meant nothing serious by what

I said. The whole thing is preposterous. Lady Rose Golightly sends us an invitation to dinner; you decline it, and I suggest that you should make use of the common stereotyped phrases of civilised life in doing so."

"Civilised life! I don't belong to civilised life. My note expresses what I mean, neither more nor less."

"I have no doubt it does. But you should remember that there is someone else to be considered. You should remember that it will expose me to ridicule as well as yourself."

"Oh, I should have thought nothing could make you ridiculous in Lady Rose's eyes."

"Once and for all, Jane, do you mean to send that atrocious note or not?"

"I do. I will not stoop to be civil to anyone on this earth whom I hate. I mean to post the note with my own hands this afternoon."

"It is not a note—you force me into saying so—that a lady could ever, under any circumstances, write to another lady."

"But I am not a lady. You seem to forget that."

"By God, I wish I could forget it!" cries Theobald, exasperated past all control. "Unfortunately, your actions give me no chance of that."

They are the cruellest words he ever spoke to her in his life, and when he has spoken them he turns—a curious passing likeness to his sister Charlotte upon his handsome blonde face—to leave the room.

"Theobald!" she exclaims quickly, "are you going? I . . . I shall see you again in the afternoon?"

"I cannot say at all," he answers with cold deliberation. "Very likely you will not see me. I have engagements that may keep me away till late."

"You are not—you are not going to The Folly?"

"Most undoubtedly I am going to the Folly. Such an insane note as you have written shall not arrive quite without explanation on my part."

And so he leaves her.

The die is cast; the turning at the cross-roads taken. From this moment on, until she finish with Chalkshire and with "respectability" for ever, Jane must stand or fall alone.

Alone! Reader, do you know the fullest meaning of that word?

CHAPTER XXIX

HIS GRACE THE DUKE OF MALTA

As soon as Theobald is clear of the house Jane bursts into a flood of tears; but they are tears of passion, thunder-showers of wrath, not the soft and wholesome rain of repentance, and spend themselves quickly.

By constitution she is the least lachrymose of women; cries, as Blossy would, when any passing storm of temper forces her into such exhibition of weakness, but knows nothing of tears as a science, never uses them as weapons against her husband, or as a source of strength to herself. Fool that she is—the thought comes across her suddenly now—fool that she is, to do aught to spoil her face, the best friend she has left her in the world! Will swollen eyes bring Theobald home a moment the quicker, or a red nose make him likelier to stay at home when he does come?

She goes upstairs to her room, bathes her face with cold water till it glows like any fresh-gathered rose: by-and-by, when Blossy's one o'clock dinner is over, spends an hour or so before her glass, dressing, and then, the child for her companion, starts away to the town of Lidlington to post her letter.

The Saturday before the races is always considered one of the gay days of the year by the good people of Lidlington, and this afternoon the shops and pavement of the High Street are really—if one compare them to Lidlington in its normal state—hilarious. As Jane walks along, slowly, and with her slender throat erect, as she has learnt to carry it of late, she meets Mrs. Coventry Brown's carriage, the Pippin family on foot, her sisters-in-law in their brougham; presently, at no very great distar[illegible] descries the approaching figures of Mrs. Crosbie and Emma, Major Hervey beside them in the road—for the ladies' voluminous silks and muslins do not give the poor little Adonis room to keep on the pavement. It is the first opportunity Jane has had of confronting Mrs. Crosbie since the blackballing business, and with the well-balanced step, the composed mechanical smile, early learnt in her profession, she advances steadily and bravely to the *rencontre*.

Jane advances steadily! But Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are not, it would seem, quite so well nerved for the meeting. At all events they shirk it by turning into the Lidlington Circulating Library, just when they are about half a dozen steps away, Major Hervey remaining at the door, prepared to give "our young Rawdon's friend" a superciliously admiring stare as she passes along.

Adonis, who has been staying for some days with the Crosbies, is in excellent spirits, excellent temper with himself, although naturally bored at being so long away from St. James's Street, and as he stands pulling his jewelled white fingers through his long purple whiskers, really looks almost young enough for the part of ardent lover which, ever since the morning of Rawdon's dismissal in Bolton Row, he has been enacting.

Of his ultimate success with Emma Marsland, Major Hervey has now little doubt. Her engagement to Rawdon is broken off definitely; the letter formally announcing the news of the rupture has been dispatched to her guardian in Jamaica; and she spends any number of hours a day in Major Hervey's society, and listens patiently to any number of Major Hervey's

twaddling stories about his own conquests, and does not draw her hand away if he chance to hold it over-long in his; does not resent it even, if her hand is sometimes raised, among the shady walks and plantations around The Hawthorns, to Major Hervey's thin lips.

How should this middle-aged Adonis, enveloped in the thick fumes of his own self-worship, doubt of poor Emmy's growing affection for him—I mean of the growing certainty of his marrying poor Emma's thirty thousand pounds? It is not a very great match for a man in his position, if one consider over it. After being courted by Marchionesses and Lady Carolinas all one's life, only to marry thirty thousand pounds, and a girl whose family is not mentioned among the "Landed Gentry," in the end! But Major Hervey has a sort of delicate suspicion that his honour, his *honour*, is engaged—or so he writes to his mother. For whether they be conscious or unconscious jugglers to their own hearts, these Herveys always keep on the mask scrupulously before each other. Through his advice, in some measure, her foolish entanglement with young Rawdon was brought to an end; the poor little girl has learnt to look to him for counsel and support, and it is too late, his conscience really tells him so, too late in the day to draw back now.

He remains, caressing his whiskers, at the door of the Lidlington Library, but does not obtain his anticipated stare at "our young Rawdon's friend," Mrs. Theobald's parasol opportunely interposing itself, not many inches from Major Hervey's nose, just as she passes him. For the disappointment, however, he is more than compensated, a minute later, by a sight sweeter to the Hervey heart than the sight of the prettiest woman in Europe: his Grace, the Duke of Malta, on foot, alone, and evidently approaching with the intention of speaking to *him*.

As the face of his mistress to a lover, as gold to a Jew, as fame to a poet, as the sun to the earth, is a duke, and a duke who will condescend to toss him a nod or a word, to Alfred Hervey.

"How are you, Mr. . . . . Hervey, to be sure—Hervey?" The labours of a lifetime have mined Alfred Hervey into three or four of the best London clubs, just as patience, long-suffering, indifference to rebuff, have brought him upon nodding terms with most of their members. "Thought I remembered seeing you somewhere. Can you tell me who that girl is who has just passed—the girl in white and blue? There, she is crossing over the road to the post-office."

Before Major Hervey can recover from his delight at being recognised, sufficiently to answer, Mrs. Crosbie, attracted by the all-powerful magnetism of the ducal voice, has fluttered forward, with Emma, to the door.

His Grace's reception of them is admirable in its brief simplicity. The Duke of Malta is one of the leaders of a school whose manners towards the other sex are not formed upon the exploded model of a De Grammont or a Chesterfield. Such women as poor Mrs. Crosbie and Emma are intolerable bores to him; neither more nor less. His pleasures, associates, sympathies, all belong to a different world to theirs; a world where cautious mammas and marriageable daughters are not; a world, perhaps, where insolence of manner, coming from a youthful duke, with an ample fortune still to get through, is leniently regarded. Though, for that matter, the Duke of Malta seldom finds himself treated with extraordinary severity anywhere.

Once a year, at the race-time generally, the Duke spends about a week with his sister Rose; and during this week what avalanches of cards, cards from the whole Chalkshire society, lay and clerical, worldly and other-worldly, pour in through The Folly doors!

"Mr. Crosbie has not yet had the honour of waiting on your Grace," says Mrs. Crosbie, the Duke having bestowed upon herself and Emma a nod like a groom's. "We were not aware, until last night, that your Grace had arrived in Chalkshire, but Mr. Crosbie will at once——"

"Thanks, can you tell me who the girl is who has just passed—good-looking, fair girl, in white and blue? There, she has just crossed over the road, by the post office."

Emma colours to the roots of her hair. Mrs. Crosbie puts up her double eyeglasses, clears her throat—thinks, perhaps, of dear old Canon Hervey's infallible recipe for virtuous human conduct—then informs his Grace that the lady's name, to the best of her belief, is Mrs. Theobald, "a lady only recently come into the neighbourhood; and——"

"Oh, *that's* Mrs. Theobald, is it?" his Grace cuts her short—"Just introduce me to her as she goes by. Not know her? Always thought everybody in the country knew everybody. Mr. . . . . Hervey?—yes, Hervey," he turns to Adonis again, "just introduce me, will you, to Mrs. Theobald?"

Mrs. Crosbie and Emma fall back into the obscurity of the shop, not enlivened by this new proof of the innate depravity of men's hearts. Major Hervey prepares himself with zest for his favourite employment of character-blasting.

"Mrs. Theobald is the wife of a Mr. Francis Theobald; your Grace may have met the man?" His Grace nods. "But is not visited in the neighbourhood. Belongs—ah—rather to the *demi-monde*, er——"

"So I thought," says the Duke, with his usual habit of frank interruption. "She hasn't much of the heavy Chalkshire cut about her. Who was she, do you know? I don't remember seeing her face about in town."

"She was," says Major Hervey, lowering his voice and preparing to wire-draw his subject-matter—are not numbers of people passing and repassing, and must they not all behold him in this delightful, confidential proximity to the Duke of Malta. "She was, till her marriage—since, for aught I know——"

"Hallo, Brabazon! Stop!" cries his Grace, as little Captain Brabazon at this moment passes down the street. They have met already at The Folly; and Major Hervey remarks, with disgust, that the Duke does not address Brabazon with the prefix of "Mister," which he so scrupulously accords to himself. "Just the man I want. Can *you* introduce me to Mrs. Theobald!"

Captain Brabazon can and will, and launches forthwith into warm praises of Mrs. Theobald's grace and beauty.

"Mr. . . . Hervey was just telling me some story or other about her as you came up," says his Grace. "I'm sure I don't know what it was all about."

"I was merely telling your Grace what Mrs. Theobald was," Major Hervey observes, in answer to this pleasantly turned little speech.

"Oh! and what was she, then? We shall have time for the story, I suppose, before she returns."

"She was," says Adonis, glancing out from the corners of his cynical old eyes, "in the 'Leg Business,' your Grace."

His Grace looks stolidly incomprehensive. It is a well-known joke among a certain set of men in London that Adonis Hervey will take any impertinence that any man with a title may choose to offer him; and this on a sliding scale—the higher the title the grosser the impertinence. The Duke of Malta, who recollects this "Mr. . . . Hervey" perfectly, recollects the joke too; and being at all times given to humour of a quiet and practical nature himself, resolves to play upon Mr. Hervey's little peculiarity now.

"'Leg business!' What on earth do you mean by that? I've heard a man called 'a leg,' Mr. Hervey, and I dare say you have; but I never knew the term applied to a woman before."

Major Hervey gives a sickly laugh, but he turns yellow; I will do him the justice to say that; he turns yellow.

Years ago—twenty, twenty-five years ago, it must have been—a dark story gained currency in the world about Alfred James Hervey; then, as now, nicknamed Adonis. Was the story true or false! I who write do not know. A gambling scene—a Grif of seventeen, beggared and driven to suicide; a court-martial (Adonis was in the army, then), some officer of the same regiment, *not* Alfred Hervey, cashiered. These were about as many facts as ever became positively known to the public at large. The circumstance occurred the other side the line, and regiments, like families, have a knack of keeping their untoward secrets to themselves. But from that day forth Hervey's was a name with a cross against it. Women shrank from him; men of unblemished honour avoided, though they might not drop, his acquaintance. He did not leave the army; his enemies—stay, I think it was his friends—said he had shown finer feeling had he done so. Alfred Hervey possessed the courage that can brave deserved contempt, the moral elasticity that can rebound from open coldness or veiled insult like india-rubber. He did not leave the [illegible] In a certain sense he lived down the story of his youth. And still the story has n[illegible] died outright. Still his name is a name with a cross against it. 'Alfred Hervey! Ah, yes, *the* Alfred Hervey, you know, who was in that bad card business years ago. Wrong man cashiered—Hervey, it was said, had interest—just the kind of underhand fellow who could wriggle his way through anything."

This, though he belongs to the best clubs in London, is the way men speak of him, even now. From this you may perceive the drift of the Duke of Malta's little pleasantry.

The poor wretch, I repeat, turns yellow. He bites the end of one of his long dyed whiskers, as though for a moment he were minded to choke himself upon that savoury morsel. Then he gets back all his coolness, all his presence of mind, and is Adonis Hervey again—Adonis Hervey, in familiar conversation with his friend the Duke of Malta, observed and envied by all this provincial herd who are passing and repassing upon their vulgar business, or vulgarer pleasure, along the High Street of Lidlington!

"Excellent, upon my soul, excellent! Don't know when I have heard a better thing! I was alluding to the ballet, Mrs. Theobald's former business; but—ha, ha, ha, your Grace gave it the wittiest turn in the world. And *apropos*, too, the shoe that does not fit the wife may fit the husband. Your Grace, it seems, has met this Mr. Francis Theobald?"

"Theobald is one of the best fellows in the world," cries Captain Brabazon. Every acquaintance honest little Brabazon possesses is sure to be one of the best fellows in the world. "You require to know *him*, certainly; but it's surprising what sterling good there is under all that lazy, Dundreary exterior of his."

"Very surprising, I should say," sneers Adonis. "Well, I am not acquainted with the man personally; but I was in Paris at the same time he was, once, and I know what used to be said of him there."

Mark, admire the boldness of this, Reader! Could anyone but a Hervey come thus to the front again after what has just passed?

"Pleasant person in his way, it was said, but a little too lucky? Turns the king a little too often towards the small hours of the morning. However, this was only an *on dit*. I should be the last man to say anything to Mr. Francis Theobald's disadvantage, now that he has come into a new neighbourhood."

The Duke of Malta stares full into Major Hervey's face. He has eyes like Lady Rose's; those opaque-looking, leaden-grey orbs, which, more than any other human eyes, seemed endowed with the faculty of hard staring. "I believe you thoroughly, Mr. Hervey. I'm quite sure, if this Francis Theobald was what you say, you would——"

"I should?" asks Adonis, all smirks and courtesy as the Duke pauses.

"Why, hold your tongue and back him, to be sure. Now, Brabazon, is our time."

And away walks the Duke, Captain Brabazon at his side, towards the graceful white-and-blue figure now not many yards distant, leaving Adonis alone in his glory on the library doorstep.

I must have given the reader a very poor and superficial idea of the Hervey nature if I need add that Adonis is in still better temper and spirits with himself than he was five minutes ago. Did not the Duke jest with him in the most affable and familiar manner, a credible witness listening?

"Have you heard the last good thing the Duke of Malta said to Adonis Hervey?" people will ask. People! Why, he will, himself, repeat the impertinence with honourable pride to every soul he meets when he gets back to London. If the toe of a duke's boot were, by accident, to propel him over hastily, I believe the construction of Major Hervey's brain would allow him to twist the slight mischance into a compliment.

And whether we ourselves happen to admire his character or not, we must confess that such a man goes a very long way indeed towards being a philosopher.

CHAPTER XXX

"NOTHING IS AGAINST MY PRINCIPLES!"

JANE is dressed precisely as she was on the day when the Crosbies made her acquaintance in Spa; the cheap little striped muslin, the black lace scarf, the blue gauze bonnet made by herself—all is the same.

But whatever she may happen to wear, magnificent silk, or plain brown holland, or twenty-five franc muslin, there is always *something* in the walk, the gait, the nameless airy grace of Francis Theobald's actress wife which, to discriminating eyes, marks her out as not belonging to that small and whaleboned section of the world which is called "society." The Duke of Malta, no unpractised judge of feminine charms (though frigid as ice to the Chalkshire beauties generally), detects this something at a glance. The Duke of Malta also decides that the blooming girlish face is as fair a one as his eyes have rested on for many a long day; and even before the formality of an introduction is gone through, resolves to accord this Mrs. Theobald, whom "the neighbourhood" will not visit, the honour of his ducal and most serious attention.

She stops, seeing that Captain Brabazon means to speak to her, and her voice, and smile, and frank untrammelled manner, complete his Grace's conquest.

"I haven't seen you for ever so long. You seem to have forgotten your way to Theobalds, Captain Brabazon?"

Little Brabazon explains that he has been spending the last few days in London, but has now returned for the great sporting event of the Chalkshire year. "You are going to the races, of course, Mrs. Theobald?" he adds; the Duke all this time standing, his leaden eyes very wide open, waiting to be introduced. "Then I hope you will do us the honour of coming to lunch in our tent? The Colonel is going to send you a formal note of invitation on Monday, but meantime you will promise me, won't you, to make no other engagement?"

"There is no other engagement I could make," cries Jane in her blunt way. "Who else in Chalkshire but your people would ask me? Yes, I shall be delighted. Only mind, my sister—you know who she is? Minnie Arundel, of 'The Royal'—will be with me. If you ask me you must ask Min too."

Captain Brabazon says everything the occasion requires respecting the pleasure Miss Minnie Arundel's presence will confer upon himself and his brother officers. Then, turning to the Duke, he introduces him to Jane:

"The Duke of Malta, Mrs. Theobald."

Jane blushes violently—that loveliest rose-pink blush of hers — then gives Lady Rose Golightly's brother about the very coolest nod his Grace has ever received from a woman during his life. Brabazon, not altogether unsuspicious of the bad blood existing between Theobald's wife and Lady Rose, interprets both nod and blush aright, and displays more tact than could have been expected of him by speaking to Blossy, and thus causing a diversion. The Duke follows suit; and, stooping, requests Miss Theobald to accord him the favour of a kiss.

"Ugh!" cries Blossy, wrinkling her nose into a grimace expressive of profoundest disgust, and clasping five small fingers tight across her lips. Then, Brabazon pleading in his turn, the little witch turns to him, and bestows, not one, but half-a-dozen kisses upon his smooth pleasant-looking face; glancing disdainfully the while at the Duke, as though to make her preference for his rival more unmistakably clear to his understanding.

"Your little daughter has learnt the first great lesson of her sex already, Mrs. Theobald."

"I don't know what you mean."

The Duke repeats his remark, which, like most remarks, does not gain in brilliancy by repetition; then, finding that Mrs. Theobald keeps silent, enlarges upon it. A woman's first instinct is to make men miserable, if she is pretty. Little girl, as pretty a little girl as he ever saw—eyes, complexion, hair, the very colour he admires—but a coquette, evidently an arch coquette by nature.

"The child shows her likes and dislikes, as I do," says Jane. "She takes to people, or she doesn't take to them, from the first, and never changes her mind afterwards."

"And do you never change, either, Mrs. Theobald?"

The Duke throws the tenderest expression he is master of into his voice—he is a common-looking "horsily"-dressed young man of five feet four or five, with an unwholesome, reddish complexion, the lack-lustre, Beaudesert eyes, a thick, short-set neck, and figure of corpulent

dimensions—and as she listens, some of the severity in Jane's face begins to relax.

"I? Why, I change a dozen times a day. I dislike people furiously in the morning, like them at noon, and begin to dislike them furiously again towards evening."

"Good heavens, what time is it now?" The Duke takes out his watch eagerly. "Five o'clock! Mrs. Theobald, has your time for disliking people furiously begun yet?"

"H'm! That depends upon who the people are."

She gives him a relenting look from her blue eyes, though her lips still keep stern and grave, and the Duke of Malta knows that the process of wasting in despair is not, just at present, going to be added to his experiences.

Do not condemn her too quickly for her weakness, Reader. Recollect that among all the complex desires which bring about human wrong-doing, none is commoner or more potent than the seldom enumerated one of desiring to seem worse than we are. How many men and women can one remember, women especially, who have studiously lost themselves by acting down to the standard which the world, justly or unjustly, has apportioned to them! Jane is not a coquette, save in innocence, as every young, and pretty, and high-spirited woman, unshackled by artificial rules of conduct, must be. Her heart, filled to overflowing with its one passionate love, has no restless craving for men's admiration. And as to fastness—well, if Blossy be fast, Blossy's mother, compared to the school of Loo Childers and Lady Rose Golightly, may be reckoned fast likewise. But she has had a distinct part assigned her to play from the moment when Mrs. Crosbie threw her upon young Rawdon's chivalrous pity on the promenade at Spa; and she is sufficiently actress, woman, human, to enjoy playing it with thoroughness.

If war was to be waged against her, on a grand and aggressive scale, by the ladies of Chalkshire, should she not enlist every husband, brother, and son, willing to enter the lists, for her own poor little guerilla system of defence?

Well, and when anyone of us has once set out briskly along the downhill road, is not our bad angel, opportunity, always at hand to loosen the drag from the wheels of our conveyance for us? Rawdon Crosbie's boyish passion has already put but too strong a weapon into Jane's hand. And now, at her side, only too ready to be her devoted servant before men's eyes, if she will accept his devotion, stands the Duke of Malta! Not, as we have seen, a man personally seductive, but a man with the purest blood—I speak genealogically—the purest blood of England in his veins, a man openly sought after, secretly sighed for by every gentle feminine breast, high and low, in Chalkshire. Can Jane resist him?

If she were an unmarried girl again, a friendless, penniless dancing-girl, as she was when Theobald fell in love with her, and this ugly little Duke of Malta were to offer her his hand, name, wealth in honourable marriage, I believe, from my heart, Jane's first instinctive answer would be an "Ugh," like Blossy's. But she can*not* resist the temptation of seeming worse than she is; of displaying her latest conquest, creditable or not creditable, full before the outraged, jealous sight of Chalkshire society. She looks at him, the same covert encouragement still in her eyes; and Captain Brabazon seeing, or saying that he sees, an acquaintance to whom he must speak, takes his leave and vanishes down an adjoining street. The Duke of Malta and Jane are left alone.

"Time for us to be going home, Bloss. Good evening to you, Duke!" bestowing a little, stage learnt salutation, half chilling, half friendly, upon his Grace.

How prettily that word "Duke" comes from her lips! How refreshing it sounds after all the fulsome "your Graces" of Major Hervey! How charming is her assumption of their equality of station!

"If you are going home on foot, Mrs. Theobald, let me be your escort. Come, come, don't say no—part of the way, at least?"

"That leaves you a fine loop-hole when you get tired," says Jane, relenting altogether. "Well, you may come part of the way, then, as you have put the request in such a mild form."

And so they start; Jane, poor little fool, walking slower, and with head more erect than ever! She jests, she rattles on in her wildest strain; her clear, out-ringing laugh startles the whole High Street of Lidlington out of its decorum. Mrs. and Miss Pippin see them coming, and run into Smith, the linen-draper's, whence they may modestly peep forth through the dresses and calicoes in the windows at the latest Theobald scandal. The Miss Theobalds meet them, and draw down the blinds of their brougham as though they were passing a funeral. By the time they get clear of the town everyone has met them. Jane's triumph, such as it is, is complete. And a burning sense of humiliation and self-contempt at her own heart is the result! She looks abruptly round, after some ultra complimentary speech of her distinguished companion's; she sees Lady Rose on every line of his vacuous, vicious face, and becomes all at once conscious that she abhors him! Having an attentive duke beside one with an audience in the High Street of Lidlington, is such a very different thing to having an affectionate duke in the same position, and without an audience, amidst unfrequented green lanes!

"Don't you think you have come quite far enough?" she asks him, with delightful impertinence. "I do. You know we only stipulated for part of the way."

"Do you mean to tell me, can you have the cruelty to tell me, that you would prefer being alone?" he replies, in his tenderest tone, and looking with warmer admiration than ever into her face.

"Well, I must say I'm fond of my own company sometimes," says Jane, returning the look with one of ice.

He thinks that she is "playing cold," leading him on by a little assumed indifference: and, making the acknowledged best countermove in such cases, begins to talk on different subjects. This is a specimen of his Grace's conversational powers:

"Not seen much of Chalkshire yet, I suppose?"

"Quite as much as I ever wish to see." Jane quickens her pace a little as she says this, and keeps Blossy's small figure well interposed between his Grace and herself.

"Ah—find it rather slow work, don't you? 'To bless the squire and his relations, and live contented with our stations?' Not quite the sort of life you are used to?"

"I find it excessively unpleasant. I don't know what you mean by 'slow.'"

Silence during ten or a dozen paces; then, "I am to have the pleasure of seeing you and Mr. Theobald at The Folly, on Monday?" remarks the Duke, returning to the charge again.

"You may see Mr. Theobald," Jane's lip quivers, but the Duke does not notice it. He can tell when a woman's lips are red and full; no more. The analysation of finer traits of emotion is not at all in the Duke of Malta's way. "You may see Mr. Theobald. You will not see me. I have just been to the post with my refusal now."

"Your refusal! Oh, come, that's all nonsense. You must change you mind now that you know—I mean, if I implore——"

"I am not going to dine with Lady Rose Golightly," interrupts Jane, flushing up, "either on Monday or any other day. We don't suit each other in the least, your sister and I."

The Duke looks considerably taken back for a moment or two after this trenchant declaration; then he shakes his head philosophically: 'Curious thing, Mrs. Theobald—at least, I don't know whether it is curious, when you think of it, but it's a fact, that all women *hate* each other."

"I am sure I don't," says Jane superbly. "There may be women whose actions I despise, but I would not take the trouble, I would not stoop to hate them!"

'Of course. You all say that, and you all do hate each other just the same. Now, my sister, Rose, to take an instance at hazard, Rose always seems to me as jolly, kind-hearted a little soul as lives. But women detest her most confoundedly, on my soul they do! I don't know that I ever saw any women but Loo Childers who could get on with my sister Rose for more than a week."

"Lady Rose Golightly and Miss Childers suit each other's tastes to a 't,' I should say," remarks Jane, her small nose well in the air. "You must remember *I* belong to quite a different class of life. What can a ballet-girl—perhaps you don't know I was a ballet-girl before I married—what can a ballet-girl have in common with ladies like your sister and her friends?"

The Duke's great leaden eyes give her a stare of interrogation. What the deuce is she driving at now? he wonders. Has Rose been snubbing her for her crimes of superior youth and beauty? Or is it possible, in these days, when jealousy is so nearly an extinct passion, that she can be angered by Rose's innocent and pastoral little flirtation with Theobald? Well, if this be the case, none the worse for him. For a pretty woman to be jealous of her own husband can never be to the disadvantage of the pretty woman's admirers.

"Poor Rose!" he goes on presently, hitting, with one of a fool's fine instincts, upon just the remark most likely to please his listener. "What a wreck she is, to be sure! A dozen years ago—when she was your age, Mrs. Theobald—you wouldn't believe what a pretty woman my sister Rose was."

"Really! And Miss Childers?" asks Jane, affecting an air of compassionate interest. "Was Miss Childers pretty, too, in her youth?"

The Duke cannot repress a chuckle. "Her youth! If Loo could only hear you? Well, no, I can't say Loo Childers ever had an ounce of beauty, to my ideas. But she had a good start, that's what it was. If a woman only gets well away from the post from the first, it goes further for her, Mrs. Theobald, you may take my word for it, than all the features or complexions in the world. It is known that so-and-so admires such a woman, and all the other fellows follow like a flock of sheep. I'm not that sort of man myself," says the Duke. "I know my own tastes, and consult no one else's. But most men only consult the fashion. Well, you see, by some fluke or another, Loo got the best start of all." The Duke gives it in detail. "And that made her reputation. 'Not admire Loo Childers?' the young fools used to say, 'Why, do you know *who* says she's the prettiest woman in London?' And to a certain extent the success of her first season has floated her ever since."

"I am ignorant, deplorably ignorant, of everything belonging to the aristocratic world," says Jane, with humility. "Indeed, in the face of such high authority, it seems presumptuous in me even to offer an opinion. But if Miss Childers was ever the prettiest woman in London, all I can say is, I am very sorry for the rest!"

"Poor old Loo! I suppose you know the name she goes by in town? Harry Desmond gave it her—deuced ungrateful of him, too, some people thought—but 'twas several years after she first came out, and when her pace *had* grown rather unlimited. I don't know whether it's quite fair to repeat it," goes on the Duke, "particularly here in Chalkshire, and now that Loo has sown her wild oats, and seems to be taking to the church. However, I'm sure you are safe. Well, Harry Desmond . . . . . . by Jove!"—the interruption is caused by the Duke's looking suddenly back over his shoulder —"by Jove, here are some of those——old Lidlington women again!" His Grace makes frequent use of exceptionally ungraceful words as he talks. "Why, th old Lidlington women are ubiquitous!"

Jane, hearing such forcible language, looks back over her shoulder too, and discovers Mrs. Pippin and her daughter, Lydia (Lydia, the eldest, plainest, most musical Miss Pippin), steadily advancing at some twenty or thirty yards distant. And all her repugnance to the Duke—it might be juster to say, all her repugnance to the Duke's attentions—vanishes like smoke at the sight. I should be unwilling, most unwilling, on my own authority, to state that Mrs. and Miss Pippin have followed the Duke of Malta and Jane of malice prepense. Idle tongues aver that such little acts of social espionage are to Mrs. Pippin as the meat and drink of daily life. But then, idle tongues speak sometimes of Mrs. Pippin as the Amateur Detective of Lidlington, and even go so far as to call her pleasant villa house—with the flowers on the landing, and the five o'clock teas, and the musical daughters—the Private and Confidential Inquiry Office. What, however, will idle tongues not say? There are outlying labourers' cottages in the direction of Theobalds, and Mrs. Pippin is known to be charitable, after a frugal and admonitory fashion, to the poor. Who shall say that she is not on her road with tracts, or good advice, or even a bottle of inexpensive home-made physic, to some fellow-creature in need of succour now? Whatever their motive, and whether chance or intention inspired their steps, certain it is that Mrs. and Miss Pippin did follow the Duke and Jane straight out of the town of Lidlington, have followed them, bit by bit gaining ground, ever since, and are now almost—for their own sakes I should hope not quite—within earshot.

Poor creature! Poor, unfortunate, misguided creature!" says Mrs. Pippin, in her dry old voice, as Jane's merry laugh rings, with a little flute accompaniment of Blossy's, through the lanes. "I beg, Lydia, that you will lower your parasol as we pass them. Quite a mercy neither of the younger girls was with us!"

A minute or two more bring Jane and her companion to the big moss-grown gates that shut out the avenue of Theobalds from the world. Here the Duke, by no means to his satisfaction, is told he must say good-bye; and here Mrs. and Miss Pippin, in spite of lowered parasols, find themselves constrained to hear and witness the following painfully improper parting scene:

"Come, you small coquette," says the Duke to Blossy, stooping down until his face is upon the child's level, "will you condescend to give me one kiss before I go?"

And as he says this he takes a dilapidated rosebud from the buttonhole of his "horsey" shooting-jacket, and offers it with mock-serious gallantry to her baby hand.

Alas! no truer daughter of Eve ever lived than Blossy Theobald. She frowns, dimples, takes the dilapidated rosebud; she kisses the Duke of Malta on the lips.

"I thought better things of you, Bloss!" cries Jane. "I didn't think your kisses were to be bought."

"What is there in the world that can *not* be bought?" remarks the Duke of Malta.

And Jane, mindful of her audience, smiles approvingly at the sentiment.

This is bad; but worse is still to follow. "Then, I may come and call on you to-morrow?" the Duke asks, as he holds her slim hand at parting. "You are quite sure, Mrs. Theobald, that Sunday visitors are not against your principles?"

Jane pauses a moment for the Pippins to come nearer, then turns her face with characteristic amiability, full in their direction.

"*Nothing* is against my principles!" She enunciates this statement with deliberation, and in a tone pointedly meant for the gallery. "*Nothing!* Sunday, or any other day, I shall be delighted to see you, Duke!"

Mrs. Pippin and Lydia wait to hear no more.

CHAPTER XXXI

HOPE OR DREAD?

Yes, the turning at the cross-roads is taken; but, did Fate will it, poor Jane's steps would only too quickly re-travel the road, even yet. Her fierce tragedy mood of the morning has all effervesced into farce—as many a tragedy mood of hers has done already; and long before she has finished dressing for dinner she is longing for Theobald's return, with a heart humble and penitent as a little child's.

"You are young, you are fair," says the pretty face—her best friend—that looks back at her from her looking-glass. "What has Lady Rose Golightly, what have all these women who condemn you and who envy you, to do, in reality, with your life? What are Lady Rose Golightly's charms by the side of yours? Win back your sweetheart"—to Jane's mind Theobald is her sweetheart still—"not by scenes of upbraiding and jealousy, but by yourself. Make yourself doubly fair for his return, smile at him, love him; and defy all the dukes' daughters in England to lure his heart out of your hands!"

She dresses herself in white, as Theobald likes best to see her, a knot of ribbon of his favourite colour in her hair. She puts on Blossy's best embroidered frock, and, immensely to Miss Theobald's satisfaction, a bewitching new pair of pink Morocco boots; she brushes the child's yellow hair into the softest little wavy curls around her baby neck.

What a pretty picture they make—I write this, but Jane's vanity endorses it—the mother of nineteen and her daughter! How she can imagine Theobald looking coolly through his eyeglass, first at one, then at the other, then making some enthusiastic speech, such as, "That he thinks he has seen plainer people in his life, taking them both together." And then how she will fling her arms round his neck and

sue forgiveness for her passion of the morning—sue, and be forgiven!

If the terms of peace be that she must apologise for her note to Lady Rose, Jane, in this revulsion of better feeling, knows well that she will accept them. Apologise to Lady Rose, win back Theobald to herself, and, perhaps—who knows? the idea has been often in her mind of late—persuade him to go to London or abroad in the autumn, and let Chalkshire, Lady Rose Golightly, and everything belonging to the time which has witnessed their estrangement, be like a bad dream, a tale that is told, and which shall be repeated no more.

Half-past six comes, but no Theobald; seven, and no Theobald. Jane, with a faltering heart, and beginning now to recall his last words before he left, walks, restless, from room to room, followed by Blossy, who is on as high a pinnacle of happiness as an embroidered frock, curls, and pink boots can place any human heart. Ten minutes past seven comes, but no Theobald.

"And if you please, ma'am, cook says if the fish is kept any longer it won't be fit to dish, and is master to be waited for?"

Before Jane can answer comes the sound of wheels, rapidly approaching along the avenue. Blossy, gladly expectant of an audience, shrieks "Dada, mine boots!" and rushing to the front door, holds one Lilliputian foot out straight, ready for admiration. Jane contents herself by peeping through the drawing-room window-curtains. Such a greeting as she has in store for Theobald cannot be given before the servants on the doorstep. Her eagerness—her foolish eagerness to see him, makes her shy as a girl awaiting the coming of her lover.

The wheels sound nearer; a dog-cart emerges through the trees, enters the gates—a dog-cart driven by a servant in the Duke of Malta's livery, and without Mr. Theobald. A minute later, and a note, directed by her husband, and to which an answer is requested, is put into Jane's hands. And this is what the note contains:

"Dearest Jenny:

"Send me over some evening clothes in my portmanteau, my dressing case, *et cetera*. I shall stay at The Folly till Monday morning.

"Your most affectionate

"N.B.—White ties." "F.T."

"The groom is waiting for an answer if you please, ma'am," says Esther, the housemaid, watching her mistress rather curiously.

Jane has turned, not pale, but ghastly greenish white. Never surely, during her nineteen years of life, has colour so unlovely marred the carnations of her face before! Nothing of moment has happened in reality. No materials even for what Theobald terms "a scene of powerful domestic interest" are here. A husband, after leaving home in a huff, stops away for dinner, resolves to stop away a day or two on a visit, and writes back to his wife for a dress suit and white ties. Nothing of moment in reality, but to Jane, in her present high-strung mood, it seems that the gates of paradise have been suddenly, brutally, shut in her face, and the gates of the place that is not Paradise set open, wide as gates can stand. Just that.

She folds the note up, restores it to its envelope; then, wonderfully calm and self-contained in manner, tells the servant that dinner may be served at once, as Mr. Theobald will not be home to-night, and goes away upstairs, not running two steps at a time as is her wont, but slowly, heavily, as if she had suddenly aged by twenty years or so, to fulfil her lord and master's bidding.

She fulfils it with scrupulous exactitude; packs up an evening suit in his portmanteau—his dressing-case, white ties, all for which he stipulated. Then, as a complimentary wife-like attention, adds a morning suit, morning ties, linen enough to last him a week if it should be his sovereign pleasure to stay away so long. This done, she rings for the girl again, bids her take down Mr. Theobald's portmanteau and give it to the Duke of Malta's groom, then walks to her looking-glass, and while the sound of the wheels tells her that the dog-cart is driving away, stares with tearless eyes—eyes that feel as though they could never shed a tear again—at the colour of her face.

What, in God's name, ails her? She feels nothing of the violent anger that she has felt towards Theobald a dozen times during the past fortnight; she feels no pain of any kind; only numb; numb, cold, and just a little sick. She has been too long without food; that's what it is. Dinner and a couple of glasses of sherry, and her colour, of course, will come right again. And she will spend the evening in looking over her finery for the races. And to-morrow the Duke will call—lucky, on the whole, perhaps, this getting acquainted with him just now. And on Monday she will put on her mauve silk dress, and her Brussels bonnet, and make the Duke walk with her, and display his devotion again before the eyes of the Lidlington world. Can one die because a husband has taste so vile that a rouged and faded face like Rose Golightly's pleases him better than one's own fresh charms? (Nothing about Lady Rose's French cook and excellent wines, and the loo and *écarté* after dinner. Curious, how even the youngest and fairest woman will always harp upon the personal influence of a rival, instead of viewing her fascinations from the matter-of-fact or masculine stand-point.)

One cannot die; but on the other hand one cannot eat. Jane comes downstairs, holding the banister rather tight as she comes, and finds the dinner theory a failure. She can drink the two glasses of sherry, and finds herself better when she has drunk them; but food offers a resistance to being swallowed, the like of which she has only once before experienced since she was born—the time when Theobald lay sick unto death at Frankfort, and when, during forty-eight agonised hours, the German doctors bade her, gravely, prepare for the worst.

'However, appetite or no appetite, she will not break down outwardly, and goes with courage through the pretence of every course; Blossy all the time singing and dancing, with the crushing unconscious cruelty of her age, around the room. Blossy, indiscriminate between dukes and grooms, has had two triumphs this afternoon: the gift of his Grace's dilapidated rose-bud, and the admiration of his Grace's groom, to whom, while Jane was packing the portmanteau, Bloss exhibited her pink boot on the doorstep. And now she is singing and dancing ballets to the inhabitants of her own world . . . to a couple of bluebottles in the window, to the sparrows twittering on the branches outside, to the portraits of the Theobald family—who seem to be looking down with profounder contempt than usual upon both mother and child. Happy Blossy! Fated, I think, by temperament, the leaven of her father's Rip Van Winkle nature that is in her, never to suffer any very poignant pain, mental or moral, while she lives!

Jane feels in a sort of dual trance: she is herself, Jane Theobald, quietly sitting at table with Esther, the housemaid, changing her plate, and Blossy dancing, and the ancestors glowering at her from their dingy frames as usual. And all the time she is some one totally distinct from herself; a woman, with hatred, with despair gnawing at her heart, a woman who watches the real Jane Theobald with a kind of hard, queer pity, knowing that the worst has not come for her—knowing, with a shudder for the fate she cannot avert, *what* that worst is likely to be!

As the sun goes down the sky grows overcast with leaden mists, and by-and-by a soft dull summer rain begins to fall. Fragrant garden-scents come up beneath its influence through the open windows; the birds, though their roosting-time is past, give little low rejoicing chirrups among the trees that overhang Theobalds. To Jane all is black. Neither birds' song nor scent of flowers reaches her heart. Dinner over, she goes upstairs with the child to her own room, takes out the materials that are to be confectioned into finery for the races, and begins to look over some fashion-books her sister sent her by this morning's post from London. In five minutes' time books and finery are tossed listlessly aside together in a heap upon the bed. The sight of new fashions generally kindles Jane's artistic impulses at once, sets her nimble fingers ready for thread and needle. All her jaundiced eyes can see in them to-night are a set of idiots, with patches of pink, blue, or mauve, stuck on the top of impossible chignons over each simpering face—idiots with deformed waists, and one Chinese foot a-piece ridiculously pointed forth from beneath their flounced and fur-belowed robes. They make her sick, as the taste of food, as the sound of the slow-falling rain, have made her sick already. Blossy begins to sing the "Ten Little Nigger Boys," a melody Miss Theobald has lately acquired, and which she goes through with conscientious vigour from the first line to the last. Jane shrinks from the merry shouting notes as though each were a blow, and rings for the nurse-girl to take the child to bed. Mamsey is tired, has a headache; Hannah will tuck Blossy in and hear her say her prayers to-night. After this she goes downstairs; walks restlessly up and down the gloomy drawing-room for a while; then wanders into the adjoining breakfast-room, takes up her place beside the window, and stands there, long, blankly gazing out into the darkening silent garden.

She is in the real, not the speech-making or "high falutin'" tragedy now; the dull, apathetic, tearless mood, when any excitement, any stimulus from without, and unconnected with our own immediate surroundings, comes as a deliverance (a mood which I have always thought must be the danger-point, or crime-engendering mood, beyond all others, of our poor frail natures). An artist, at such a pass, may find safe relief in expression. If Jane were on the stage still, with what inimitable grace might not her jealous heart goad her into pirouetting to-night! In the dumb, pent-in life of ordinary men and women there are no such legitimate safety-valves. She feels she must do something—speak to somebody; must act, move, get away from herself. The thought of sleep, or rather of watching, in this big lonely house, and listening to the rats at midnight—she has had plenty of experience of such watching during the last fortnight—is intolerable to her; yet she must bear it all. And to-night it will be watching for the morning only; not, as it has been before, for Theobald. No scene, either of anger or forgiveness, to look forward to: only the dawn of another day of separation—of another day that he will spend at Lady Rose Golightly's side.

Yet she must bear it all!

"Must? And why must?" cries out her heart, suddenly recovering from its lethargy. "Why, with youth and beauty still to the fore, mope through such an existence as this cold and unloved and neglected one that she sees opening before her? Why not return to the stage, and, at least till she is thirty years old, *live?* No fear of coldness or neglect there. The public is not Lidlington society; the public is not Francis Theobald. Ah, and would not any admiration, any notoriety, be better than such a life as Chalkshire is likely to offer her? Why, even the Duke of Malta . . . ."

A ring comes at the front-door bell just at this culminating-point in her meditations, and Jane's heart beats violently—beats with a sensation which I scarce know whether to class as one of hope or of dread. "Sunday or any other day I shall be delighted to see you," she had told the Duke at parting. Is he taking her at her word already? A man's quick step sounds in the hall, approaches along the passage; the door leading from the drawing-room opens, and in the shadowy half light she recognises, not the vacuous red face and corpulent dimensions of the Duke of Malta, but Rawdon Crosbie.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SECRET OF JANE'S LIFE

The servant follows with a lamp, and Rawdon sees Jane's face advancing out of the gloom, unsmiling, but with a look of kindly surprise better than any set smile of welcome, to meet him.

"Bring in tea at once, Esther," she cries. "Mr. Crosbie, you find me all in darkness. I'm alone; Theobald is dining out to-night, and I forgot how late it was. I hope, in common charity, you will stay and drink tea with me?"

She shakes his hand warmly, but her own hand is deathly chill; there is an evident flurry and want of ease in her manner, and Rawdon Crosbie looks at her narrowly.

Has anything very dreadful happened?" he asks, as soon as the servant has left them alone; "has anything very dreadful happened, that you have gone back to calling me 'Mr. Crosbie'?"

"Oh, thousands of things have happened," Jane answers lightly. "I've got news of all sorts to tell you. If you hadn't come, I meant to have written you one of my lovely epistles. The fortnight expired yesterday, you know, and I was just beginning to think you had forgotten about the races. Min is coming down on Wednesday for the day, and Captain Brabazon has invited us to lunch with them on the course. And Rawdon, my dear boy—don't lose your breath—but his Grace the Duke of Malta is in Chalkshire, and he and I are tremendous friends already."

"The express leaves Lidlington at nine forty-five," remarks Rawdon, "and it is about nine now. If I hurry I shall be in time for it. Good-night, Mrs. Theobald."

"Good-night, before you have said 'How do you do?' Why, you don't mean to say you are going to Woolwich to-night?"

"I am going back by the mail at eleven," says Rawdon; "at least, I intended to do so. I ran down, hoping to pay you a visit of an hour or so, Mrs. Theobald; but, under existing circumstances, I see I may as well be off at once. With the Duke of Malta for your friend, what room can there be left for me in——"

"My affections?" interrupts Jane, with a laugh. "Oh, you don't know how elastic my affections have become—how warm and genial my heart is growing to everyone! . . . And so you really took the trouble to come all this way to see me? Is this a good sign, or a bad one, Rawdon? What have you been doing with yourself? How has the world been using you since that evening when I preached you the memorable sermon by gaslight in Maddox Street?"

She talks cheerfully, but with too many words, with too palpable an effort at naturalness to be thoroughly natural—Rawdon Crosbie discerns. And how pale she has grown!—pale, and with what dark rings round her eyes! She looks older by any number of years than on the night when they danced the "Grande Duchesse" waltzes, and walked back to the Bellevue together, her hand upon his arm, the June moonlight kissing her soft, young, happy face.

"I hope you think me looking my best, Mr. Crosbie? I'm just in the humour for compliments this evening, so please tell me something flattering."

"I think you looking desperately ill," answers Rawdon, with concern he neither dissembles, nor seeks to dissemble, in his voice. "This bleak Chalkshire air can surely not agree with you?"

"No; that's just what it is," says Jane, with a short laugh. "The bleak air of Chalkshire does not agree with me. I was thinking how I could best have a change from it at the very time when you came in."

"And Blossy, does she want change, too? And" (suddenly recollecting the existence of the master of the house)—"and Mr. Theobald?"

"Blossy is perfectly well, thanks," answers Jane; the servant at this minute brings in the tea-things, and she speaks with calmness and deliberation; "and Mr. Theobald too. I told you, did I not, that he is dining at The Folly to-night? Chalkshire is Mr. Theobald's native air, you see; it is not mine. That makes all the difference. Have you been to any of the theatres since I saw you, Rawdon? Have you seen Min in her new part? All the papers speak highly of her except one, and we know well enough who the miserable wretch was who wrote that. Even poor good old Min is not without her enemies."

Then, without waiting for one of her questions to be answered, she crosses the room abruptly, and seating herself at the table, begins to pour out the tea.

Never in her life, perhaps, has Jane looked fairer than she does at this moment, despite her pallid cheeks and hollow eyes. If her beauty hitherto has had one definite fault, it has been in its overflow of health and freshness. A harsh critic might at any time have called it milkmaid beauty, without great exaggeration. Paler, thinner, graver, Jane has advanced from *beauté de diable* to loveliness—or so Rawdon Crosbie thinks.

He watches her, with the lamplight bringing out the soft contours of her white dress and whiter throat and arms, and knows how much the madness which has overtaken and made shipwreck of his life has, after a fortnight's separation, abated; watches her, and thinks that to hold the place in her regard De Lansac holds—to be De Lansac himself, Frenchman, adventurer, no matter what the man may be—he would gladly lay down all that, six weeks ago, made life of value in his eyes.

"I was fool enough to quarrel with my dinner to-day," cries Jane, in her usual unromantic style, "and I am going to make up for it now. I hope you are bread-and-butter hungry. It seems our fate to eat odd kind of meals together," she goes on, as Rawdon takes his place beside her at the tea-table. "Do you remember our supper that first night at Spa, and how shocked you were at having to eat with your fingers? Ah! I have risen in the world since then. I can offer you a white-and-gold plate, and a real silver teaspoon now."

"And white-and-gold plates and real silver teaspoons are such essential conditions of enjoyment," says Rawdon Crosbie.

"We spent a very jolly evening, I must say, though you were in such a queer temper. Do you remember how angry you were when I told you not to tread on your own toes, and to take De Lansac's dancing for your model? Do you remember the girl in white-and-scarlet you so nearly fell in love with?"

"So very nearly," answers Rawdon. "What a blessed thing it might have been for me if I had asked her to dance, as I intended!"

"Perhaps. I can never go into the might-have-beens of life. The facts as they are are enough for me—rather too much, just at present. If I hadn't left the stage, I might have been a second Taglioni by this time."

"Heaven forbid!" says Rawdon, hastily. "I mean, how much better it is that you should be—what you are!"

"You think so. Taglioni made heaps of money; and money, my dear child, money is everything. As the Duke of Malta says, what is there in the world that money can't buy?"

"And has it got to your thinking with the Duke of Malta's thoughts already, Mrs. Theobald?"

"Of course. Where is the good of having noble acquaintance if you don't try to raise yourself to their standard?"

"I must remember that sentiment of yours. The next time I talk to anyone with a title—Lady Rose Golightly, for instance—I must try to put it into practice."

No want of colour is in Jane's cheeks now. At Lady Rose's name the blood rushes with painful vividness over her face and throat. "Lady Rose is—a very fitting sister for the Duke of Malta!" she remarks quietly, but with a curious quiver of the lip. "What were we talking about? Oh, the white-and-scarlet girl you so nearly fell in love with at Spa. Let us keep as long as we can to pleasant subjects—to any subject that is not Chalkshire! First, though," she puts out her hand and lays it kindly on young Rawdon's wrist, "I want you to tell me a little about yourself. How are your affairs getting on, Rawdon? Badly, I'm afraid, as you have not cut me."

"On the contrary," answers Rawdon promptly, "my affairs are getting on a thousand times better than I could have hoped, inasmuch as you have not cut me! As I walked up in the rain from the station I was in fear and trembling, Mrs. Theobald. I hardly dared to ask whether you were at home, it seemed so unlikely that you would be good enough to receive me——"

"After being blackballed by the Lidlington Croquet Club, do you mean? If you knew how lightly that weighed on me!—and it was all Blossy's fault. Don't you remember the dirt pies? I felt it just a little, perhaps, when your mamma's note first came. Oh, it was a very civil note, Rawdon. You needn't fire up about nothing. I don't think I should mind it much if I was set in a pillory and pelted now. But this is no answer to my question. How are your prospects looking? How is your engagement—how is everything at home getting on?"

"My prospects," says Rawdon, "are that, barring accidents, and if the usual death-rate of our regiment prevails, I may become a captain by the time I am five-and-forty. My engagement is broken off, and no one at home has written to me during the last ten days."

"Cheerful! And our friend with the eyelids, Major Hervey, what of him?"

"Our friend, Major Hervey, is staying, I believe, at my father's. I ought not to include him in the 'no one.' Major Hervey writes me charming little notes of sympathy and admonition, which I find very useful indeed—as pipe-lights."

Jane looks at him searchingly. "Rawdon, my friend," she cries in her incisive way, "do you know that you are jealous of Major Hervey? Don't deny it; don't be ashamed of it. You are jealous, and you have a right to be jealous. This stupid lover's quarrel between you and Miss Marsland would have been made up long ago, only for him. I saw them together for a minute, to-day, in Lidlington, and in that minute I jumped to my own conclusions. Major Hervey intends that Miss Marsland shall be his wife."

"I have not the slightest concern with Major Hervey's intentions," says Rawdon, in a tone that he by no means succeeds in rendering indifferent. "Miss Marsland is as free as air to choose or accept whom she will. She has rejected me, and for me that is sufficient."

"Miss Marsland rejected you? Yes; but did you tell her the truth? Did you apologise humbly, as I advised you, for being in such bad company that night at Wilcocks's?"

"I told Miss Marsland the truth about the past, the present, and, as far as I was able to look forward, the future; and on the strength of that truth she rejected me."

"And you are contented that it should be so? You are happier in your mind now that you have broken with everybody who cares for you in the world?"

"I am singularly happy this evening, Mrs. Theobald. And I hope I have not broken quite with everybody who cares for me in the world!"

"You are a fool!" says Jane, a little sadly. "It seems to me, sometimes, that every man and woman on the earth is a fool. What we can't have we want; what we can have we don't care for."

"Then our best wisdom is to apply to ourselves the French axiom," remarks Rawdon: "'*Quand on n'a pas ce qu'on aime, il faut aimer ce qu'on a.*'"

The words are not out of his mouth before Jane bursts into one of her wildest laughs. To talk sentiment, as Rawdon has already found to his cost, is, at all times, to tread on thinnest ice, with this least sentimental of God's creatures.

"I think if I was dying it would make me laugh to hear you talk French! 'Ce qu'ong amie! Ce qu'ong a!' I wonder why all Englishmen have such a ridiculous accent?"

"For the same reason, probably, that they

know nothing about flounces and bonnets, and tread on their own toes when they dance," says Rawdon; his old animus on the subject reviving on the instant.

"Probably," remarks Jane, coolly. "Well, these things are their misfortune, not their fault. It is not given to every man to be——"

"A Monsieur de Lansac, perhaps?" suggests Rawdon, as she hesitates.

In a second her face grows grave. "You are quite right there," she replies. "It is given to few men, indeed, to be a Monsieur de Lansac. Oh, how good it is to hear his name—to think of him only, in this horrid place, among all this horrid Chalkshire respectability!"

"Yes, that is a theme on which you are always warm!" Rawdon exclaims, bitterly.

"Warm? I should think I was warm! If you only knew how and why I first got to care for De Lansac! I was near telling you once, that evening when"—she turns her head a little aside —"when Blossy found my silver amulet in your pocket. You remember?"

"Yes, I remember," says Rawdon, fixing his eyes coldly and sternly on her face. "The amulet I had the folly to rob you of!—the treasure which, as M. de Lansac's gift, was so inexpressibly precious to you!"

"'De Lansac's gift!' 'Inexpressibly precious!' What nonsense are you talking now?" cries Jane, looking up at him with her unabashed blue eyes. "Did I ever tell you the locket was De Lansac's gift, pray?"

"I believed—certainly I believed, from the value you put upon it, that it must be so," answers Rawdon Crosbie.

"Then you believed wrong. See what comes of being over-wise. Once, long ago, I lost that locket from my chain—it was in Paris—and De Lansac was with us. Well, I never was so wretched about anything in my life, and when we got it again, by paying at least three times its worth, De Lansac had my initials cut on it for me. That is the whole story of my 'inexpressibly precious treasure,' Mr. Rawdon Crosbie."

"I beg pardon, humbly, Mrs. Theobald. You must allow that it was not likely I should be able to evolve the story out of my own conscience."

"I don't know what you mean by 'evolving.' It isn't likely, blinded with prejudice as you are, that you should guess any truth about such a man as De Lansac. You know what he is, of course? Oh, I repeat," cries Jane, "I repeat, how good it is to think of him, and of all the happy days we spent together, in this wretched place! A foreign adventurer — yes," giving weight to every syllable as though the Pippins were still her listeners, "a foreign adventurer, living about in Ems, Spa, Baden Baden—no particular principles; no particular country; no particular friends, relatives, or connections. An adventurer; for anything I know to the contrary —what would be styled, by people like you, a *chevalier d'industrie.*"

Rawdon is silent. He cannot forget that the possible *chevalier d'industrie* was the intimate associate in Spa of Francis Theobald—Francis Theobald, who is dining with the Duke of Malta to-night; whom everyone in Chalkshire would call "friend," were they not choked off by the legitimacy of the bonds that knit him to Jane and Blossy.

"But I don't care a rush for all that," she goes on. "I don't care a rush whether people are reckoned virtuous or the reverse. If the wine suits my taste, I don't look at the label on the bottle. De Lansac saved Theobald once from ruin—could a man of the nicest honour have done more? And I shall love him to my life's end. You wouldn't care to hear how it happened, I suppose?"

"I care to hear anything in which you are deeply concerned, Mrs. Theobald."

"Well, I hadn't been married six months— we were spending the winter in Homburg—and one night, or rather one morning at daybreak, Theobald came back home and told me quietly that we were beggars. He had been at a dinner-party given by De Lansac at his lodgings, and after dinner they had played *banco.* I don't know the game myself; I never learnt, and I never will learn, one card from another, but I believe there is something in it, isn't there, that is called following your money? Theobald, it seems, had done this, and had followed it to such purpose as to lose every farthing we had in the world. I can't tell you how much that was. I was a little fool, just past sixteen. I knew no more about money then than Blossy knows now. But all was gone, he told me; yes, to our last hundred-franc note."

"And in M. de Lansac's pocket, naturally?" puts in Rawdon, as she pauses.

"In De Lansac's pocket, naturally. Theobald and he had got intimate during the winter. When we first knew him he lived in the same hotel where we lived; and after breakfast that morning—I can see it all, as if it happened yesterday—he came in to visit me. I was alone, and De Lansac put out his hand to me, English fashion, as I had taught him, and inquired in his usual friendly way for Monsieur Theobald.

"I blush, to this day I blush, when I think of my answer," goes on Jane. "Could he have the vileness to pretend friendship for us still?" I asked him. From the first hour we met him he had caused everything to go wrong with my life. He had robbed me of my husband, had lured Theobald night after night to the gambling-table, and now that we were ruined through him, he had come here to exult and triumph over us in our misery?

"Poor De Lansac! He heard me out patiently, but with a face white as any stone. When I had done, spent all the boiling passion that was at my heart, and you know—no, I believe you don't know yet—what I can be when my blood is up: 'Madame,' said he, in his quiet polished way, 'I think you are unjust in saying that any influence of mine has been wanted to give M. Theobald the taste for play. As regards the money that nominally changed hands last night,

he added, 'why the whole thing was a jest, a pleasantry. Your husband, Madame, had dined too well, played—like a child, a madman,—but by good fortune his I.O.U.s found their way, all of them, into my pocket, and I have brought them back to him.'

"And as he said this, he took some small bits of scribbled paper from his memorandum-book, folded them neatly, tore them across, then flung the torn pieces into the fire. That is the story of how I came to love De Lansac."

Jane has moved from the teatable in the course of her narrative, and stands now beside the wide-open window—stands there looking out with flushing cheeks, with moistened eyes, into the darkness. And, as she stands thus Rawdon's suspicions on the subject of De Lansac begin to waver.

That she has told him the truth, in the main, he never doubts. Jane's worst enemy would find it hard to suspect her of deliberate falseness. But is it the whole truth? Watching her fair flushed face, Rawdon Crosbie, with the self-torturing cleverness of jealousy, asks himself this question. Could De Lansac's generosity have been so purely disinterested? or did she hold his heart captive too (in this easy fashion she has of holding men's hearts captive), half-unconscious, careless at least, that she was doing so, and receiving his chivalrous devotions to her husband's interests as a matter of course?

"Theobald took it all—as Theobald takes everything," says Jane presently. "'Honour among thieves, my dear Jenny.'" Whenever Jane narrates she gets dramatic instinctively. You would think it was Theobald's lazy, pleasant, half-sarcastic voice that speaks. "'Honour among thieves. It's a proverb, the truth of which I have often doubted, my dear, but our friend's example shows that there may be something in it after all. De Lansac considers, evidently, that we are bound, as vagabonds, by a common freemasonry, and gives us the benefit of the guild.' So Theobald jested the obligation away at the time. Afterwards, when we got a little better off in the world again—Theobald has come into one or two windfalls, you know, but they've all managed to disappear in the same way—he was able to be of use to De Lansac. If one wrote figures down upon a piece of paper we might be quits. But I think one can never cry quits really as regards an action like De Lansac's," says Jane. "More than that, I wouldn't like to cry it. I should be very sorry to be rid of my debt, and all the gratitude and affection my debt has brought with it."

Her unashamed eyes, her steadfast voice, nay, the mere mention of that one word, "affection," make Rawdon waver more and more. And still he does not yet light upon the truth. It may sound cynical, paradoxical, to say that the very last person men ordinarily dream of being jealous of is—a husband. But in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred I believe this to be the truth. Throughout Rawdon's relations with Jane—the first five minutes in the Spa ball-room over—Mr. Francis Theobald has, in truth, been a personage who has never troubled his thoughts at all. A clothes-wearing man, with a drawl, an eyeglass, a couple of inches of brain, a general talent for keeping conveniently out of the way—this, if he had been obliged to clothe his ideas on the subject with words, would probably have been Rawdon Crosbie's analysis of Jane's husband.

That such a nonentity, moral and social, could, after four years of marriage, fill a heart like Jane's "fuller than it could hold" of passionate love, is a contingency too wildly remote ever to have crossed young Rawdon's imagination.

"And so I hope," Jane goes on, "I hope you will never make spiteful speeches again about De Lansac. If you had been in a fitting temper to listen I should have told you all this long ago; yes, on that very evening when Bloss rescued my poor old silver amulet out of the hands of the Philistines ——"

"The Philistines being ——"

"Mr. Rawdon Crosbie, aye, for you are a Philistine, Rawdon, heart and soul, and you will be one till you die, the better for you. If you had kept my locket, some day or other Mrs. Rawdon Crosbie would have found it. 'Who gave you this thing, sir? But I *insist* upon knowing' (and now it is Miss Marsland's voice that speaks). 'It belonged to a woman once! Who was she? What was she? Where was she?' 'My dear, I scarcely remember; when I was a lad I had so many of these trifles,' *et cetera*. And Mrs. Rawdon presents it to one of her numerous children to hang round the cat's neck."

"Yes, that is all so likely. It is so perfectly certain that Mrs. Rawdon Crosbie will ever exist! In the meantime, Mrs. Theobald, though you have put the subject aside very dexterously, I think you have not told me the romance about the locket itself?"

"Did I promise to tell it you? I certainly don't remember doing so. However, as it seems you *will* have long-winded stories to-night, I suppose I may as well set your curiosity at rest. To begin with, then, there's no romance at all. It was only . . . only the first present Theobald ever made me. I was walking along the Strand with him one evening before we were married, looking into the shops, and when we got to a jeweller's window he asked me to choose whatever I liked there for myself. I wouldn't have taken any expensive present from him; I can't tell you why—perhaps because I'd seen so much of what expensive presents came to with other people. But this little locket was secondhand, and ticketed 'seven shillings only,' so I said it was just the sort of thing I wanted, and he went in and bought it for me."

Jane's eyes are downcast now, her tongue falters, her breast heaves. And in this moment Rawdon Crosbie first discovers the secret, the anomaly of her life—she is in love with Theobald still!

CHAPTER XXXIII

MR. THEOBALD FOLLOWS UP HIS LUCK

SUCH, reader, is the real, true, unvarnished history of this memorable Saturday evening. Half an hour later young Rawdon, musing much on the fatuous constancy and much on the painful want of discrimination to be met with in woman's nature, is on his road back to the station. Half an hour later Mrs. Theobald stands blankly looking out into the wet dark night again, not a thought but the miserable ever-present one of Theobald and of her own corroding jealousy in her heart. But such is not the way that history is written by the wise heads of Lidlington. The station-master's niece is Mrs. Pippin's housemaid, or the Theobalds' cook is first-cousin to Mrs. Coventry Brown's scullion—one need not be mathematically precise the channels through which parochial small-talk diffuses itself—

> ——"That small, small, imperceptible
> Small-talk, which cuts like powdered glass
> Ground in Tophana."

"Rawdon Crosbie came down from London last night, expressly to call on Mrs. Theobald—her husband away from home, and she received him! But, then, what can you expect? Mrs. Pippin herself overheard her say, to the Duke of Malta of all men, that 'nothing was against her principles'; and, which made it additionally awkward, dear Lydia was obliged to hear it, too. Still, Lydia Pippin is no child; Lydia Pippin must be seven-and-twenty if she's a day."

"For my part I don't know what society is coming to. A young woman like Mrs. Theobald to receive a bachelor's visit at such an hour of the night, and her husband absent!"

"Mrs. Theobald is in the habit of having bachelor parties in her husband's absence. All actresses, it is well known, have these free manners!"

"Mrs. Theobald"—the story, like a snowball, acquiring bulk and consistency as it rolls—"Mrs. Theobald gave a large bachelor party last night, her husband absent; and, whatever his faults, poor creature, one must *feel* for Francis Theobald. Rawdon Crosbie, and a party of young men and actresses (of free manners) came down to it by the express. Sure of it? Ah, we have our information from only too good a source. Mrs. Coventry Brown's Sarah . . ." and so forth.

Coming out of church, people talk over the latest Theobald scandal in whispers. It reaches Mr. and Mrs. Crosbie. It reaches poor Emmy, who indeed has the news "broken" to her, with the sort of feline tenderness you may see shown to a disabled mouse, by Adonis Hervey. It reaches every house in the neighbourhood, excepting perhaps The Folly—an atmosphere unfavourable to the milk-and-water gossip which forms strong meat to the unsophisticated palates of the Lidlington babes.

Along the primrose paths of The Folly everything glides at its usual smooth and tranquil downhill pace. An opportune acquisition to Lady Rose's little household arrived last night, in the person of a certain well-known, somewhat too well-known, London celebrity—Colonel Desmond—an old and devoted friend of Miss Childers. "Poor Harry Desmond has got a wife somewhere about in the world, so people *can't* say anything spiteful about him and me," Loo will declare. "Delightful to enjoy one honest friendship without being suspected of base matrimonial motives"; and sauntering slowly at Harry Desmond's side among the roses and butterflies, or reclining in the shadiest of pagoda summer-houses, while Harry Desmond smokes and tells her the last news from town, right pleasantly does Loo improve the shining hours of this Sunday afternoon in Mr. Smylie's absence.

Lady Rose devotes herself exclusively to Theobald, and if she does not succeed in amusing him, keeps him at least from being more than negatively bored. Mr. Theobald is exceedingly sleepy to-day, if the truth be told. He was up late last night, Colonel Desmond and the Duke both being fond of a little play, and won largely, as you will often observe men to win at cards when they are letting the best stakes of life slip unheeded through their fingers. The temperature of The Folly gardens is delicious; the Duke's cigars are irreproachable; Lady Rose possesses that excellent thing in woman, a low-pitched, soothing voice, and what she says is not of a nature to call for any brain exertion whatever, in the way of replies. Under these favourable conditions Francis Theobald, veritable lotus-eater that he is, dreams through the hours from luncheon till dinner-time, unruffled in spirit, unvexed by any haunting thought of to-morrow, or of the domestic jars to-morrow is likely to bring with it.

He has, by nature, the fatalest short mental vision with which mortal was ever endowed. It is not that he will not look; the man *cannot* look beyond the present moment. He has drifted into this friendship, flirtation, intrigue—call it by what name you will—with Lady Rose, not caring for her; caring for Jane in his heart, as he has always done; but won by the French cook and round games, and the absolute dulness of Theobalds, and the necessity (necessity, that has brought many worthier men than he to grief) of doing something with one's evenings. And now, not knowing what he risks, not seeing whither he goes, behold him drifting farther and farther still!

Jenny lost her temper, both of them lost their tempers, about that ridiculous note yesterday; the way Lady Rose received it, Theobald at her side, was angelic—no other word befits the occasion. Wise for him to keep out of the way till the storm blows over, as it must do, like all other storms. Poor Jenny! As it is Sunday, she will be sure to have Brabazon, or Dolly Standish, or some other young fellow from the Fort, to amuse her; and then she will have her finery for the races to think of, and the races themselves, and the race-ball on Wednesday . . . . but no; everything unpleasant will

be forgotten long before Wednesday—or so Mr. Theobald thinks.

At dinner, the Duke, who has been absent the best part of the afternoon, remarks, casually, that he was fortunate enough to find Mrs. Theobald at home when he called on her to-day, "and I am over head and ears in love with your daughter, Theobald," adds his Grace, pleasantly. "She has promised to marry me when she is eighteen, and her mamma consents. Do you?"

Mr. Theobald, thus addressed, puts up his glass, and with the most perfect equanimity in the world, looks across the table into the Duke of Malta's face: "I consent to whatever my wife tells me is best," he remarks meekly. "In everything connected with domestic matters, I look upon myself simply as non-existent."

Colonel Desmond, knowing pretty well the extent of his Grace's admiration for Mrs. Theobald—for indeed the Duke of Malta is not over reticent in such matters—Colonel Desmond gives Theobald a curious kind of look, and turns the conversation. Lady Rose and Loo Childers exchange glances.

At night the Duke is again a heavy loser. When Lady Rose proposes to Theobald that he should remain at Beaudesert till the morning of Wednesday, the race-day, it almost appears to him in the light of a duty that he should follow up his luck and do so. But he must, of course, go over to Theobalds first, see his wife, and find out if her plans for the week will be disconcerted by his prolonged absence.

"Oh, that, of course," cries Lady Rose, wincing in spirit, but with her softest smile and voice, "and if you can only persuade Mrs. Theobald to have no better engagement and to dine with us to-day, do."

So, in the afternoon, Lady Rose's pony carriage is at Mr. Theobald's disposal, and he drives over to Theobalds. Jane is not at home.

"Missus have gone out for a walk, and Miss Blossy too," Esther, the housemaid, explains to her master, "and the Duke of Malta is with them, sir,"—in rather an awe-struck tone, this. "The Duke of Malta called soon after Miss Blossy's dinner, and I heard Missus say they might as well all walk over to Lidlington together."

Mr. Theobald receives the intelligence with perfect sweet temper, just a little relieved, perhaps, at being quit for the moment of domestic explanations. He inquires how Mrs. Theobald is, and Miss Blossy? then saunters, whistling, his hands in his pockets, into the breakfast-room, and writes the following affectionate note, which he leaves, folded but unsealed, upon the table:—

"Dearest Jenny,

"I am thinking of stopping at the Folly till Wednesday morning. Explain why, when we meet. I shall come over in good time to drive with you and Min to the course.

"Your most attached husband,

"F. T.

"If there is anything to bring me back sooner, be sure you let me know. How about persuading Min to stay for the race ball in the evening?"

Having done which, Francis Theobald feels that he has discharged every domestic and social duty that can possibly be expected of him; and with the lightened heart that ever waits on a conscience at ease with itself, goes back to Beaudesert and to Lady Rose Golightly for another couple of days.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RIGHT AND WRONG OF THINGS

All grades and sections of Chalkshire society go, as we have seen, to the Lidlington flower-show: the serious-minded early, the carnal-minded late; the halters between ultra-fast and ultra-slow, the "Mr. Facing-both-ways" of John Bunyan, at the intermediate hour that corresponds with the vague and neutral-tinted hue of their philosophy.

But as regards the races it is otherwise. A clever hand may trim even here, but it mu.. be with a difference. Thus, Mrs. Crosbie, while disclaiming all prejudice on the score of races *as* races—has not Mr. Crosbie for years consented to act as one of the stewards?—finds that the glare of the chalk soil on the Common has a tendency to affect the eyes, and (unless peradventure any persons of title offer her a seat in their carriage) makes a point of paying a round of distant visits with Emma on the race-day. The Pippin family remain at home, and avoid subscribing to the fund, on principle, but watch the race-goers from behind their drawing-room window-blinds, and think no evil of attending the race ball in the evening. Mrs. Coventry Brown considers it a duty to grace the course with her presence, but leaves *after the cup race*, a compromise the fine drawn delicacy of which it would be hard to over-praise. The absolutely impracticably unworldly set not only abjure horse-racing itself, but also the very sight of those who frequent the unhallowed sport—strictly keeping within doors for the day, and putting up the shutters of such windows as command a view, near or distant, of the Belial-thronged road.

And this is the set to which Francis Theobald's sisters belong. Great, therefore, is the shock occasioned to Thomas, the serious coachman, when, on the morning of August the first, in this particular year of grace 187—, he receives orders from Miss Charlotte Theobald's own fair lips to harness Diocletian, and bring round the brougham! Thomas, with whom it is a primary article of faith that the servants in unworldly families should have the race-day to themselves, and to the quiet enjoyment of beer and skittles at adjacent public-houses!

However, what Miss Charlotte rules, not even Thomas, a despot in his way, may gainsay. Round comes Diocletian's Roman nose, a quarter of an hour after the order is given, to the Miss Theobalds' front door, and forth, a minute later,

emerge the two Miss Theobalds, black-robed, funereal-paced, with crape veils concealing their maiden faces from the profane eye of man.

"To my brother's. The shortest road," ejaculates Miss Charlotte, as Thomas, finger to hat, stands inquiring—his whole mental nature in a state of chaos—as to which road he shall take. "To my brother's, I say. Are you deaf?"

And then away, with blinds closely drawn down, the sombre, old-fashioned brougham starts off—*against* the tide of race-going vehicles—vans, farmers' carts, ginger-beer trucks, and the like—so not without peril to shafts and wheels and Thomas's temper, in the direction of Theobalds.

It is exactly half-past ten when Diocletian's melancholy head enters the great gates from the avenue; and the first thing that greets the Miss Theobalds is the vision of two summer-clad, youthful figures leaning forth, laughing and talking with resonant cheerfulness from the drawing-room window, a small voice within, by dint of the volume and spirit with which it is executing the "Ten Little Nigger Boys," giving the impression of a whole room full of uproarious company in the background.

The figures dart away, the "Nigger Boys" have died into profoundest silence by the time the brougham comes to a standstill. But if Francis and his wife have any intention of denying themselves in this open and shameless manner to their own flesh and blood, Miss Charlotte Theobald thanks heaven she has sufficient moral courage, sufficient sense of right and duty, to circumvent their intentions!

"Your mistress *is* at home," she asserts, the moment Esther, the housemaid, opens the door. "Let me out of the carriage, Thomas. I saw Mrs. Theobald at the drawing-room window as we passed."

And straight from the brougham into the house and on to the drawing-room Miss Charlotte stalks, mutely followed, with deprecating steps, with various despondent little shakes of the head, by the elder sister.

What an altered house Theobalds has become, after only four weeks of misrule—a four weeks' reign of Bohemianism and anarchy! Its aspect makes Miss Charlotte choke, and brings tears to the milder eyes of Annie Theobald. Open windows and doors let in dust, draughts, sunshine, and general deterioration as they list. The indecent sound of a servant singing—singing over her work—may be heard from the kitchen. A tiny spade, with earth still clinging to it, a garden hat, a battered doll, indications of a child's untidy, ungovernessed life, are everywhere. An old smoking-cap of Mr. Theobald's is stuck, with a rakish air, on the venerable head of Blossy's friend the Mandarin. The very Cupids on the ceiling wear a dissipated and Bacchanalian aspect. Upon the drawing-room carpet shreds of muslin and ribbon lie thick as on the floor of a milliner's workshop. Odours of millefleurs and musk tell still of the "half-world" presence of Miss Minnie Arundel.

"And this is what Theobalds has sunk to!" says the elder Miss Theobald, throwing back her veil, and raising her handkerchief to her eyes. "And brought up to such principles as Francis was! In less than five weeks they have taken as many years' lawful wear out of the carpet."

"Theobalds, and all belonging to Theobalds, will sink a good deal lower yet," is Miss Charlotte's response. "Don't waste your tears, Anne, pray. You will have a worthier occasion for them, depend upon it, than a few dozen yards of spoilt carpet."

After this they relapse into silence, ceremoniously standing, each of them, as though they were in the house of an utter stranger, with lips and eyes set, with clasped hands rigid as stone; and at the end of two or three minutes' time Jane makes her appearance.

She wears no finery, has copied nothing from the simpering fashion-book dolls, after all. A white muslin dress, made up hastily by her own hands overnight, a sailor's hat trimmed with a band of blue ribbon, a pair of neatly-fitting primrose gloves—this is Jane's attire for the Chalkshire races; just the kind of holiday attire she would have been able to afford in the days before she ever saw Mr. Theobald, the days when an outing with Uncle Dick to Sydenham or Epping comprised all that the poor little ballet-child knew or could have imagined of possible terrestrial enjoyment.

Charlotte Theobald eyes her fixedly, and with cutting minuteness. An hour spent with Min, who came down by the earliest train this morning, determined to lose nothing of her holiday, an hour of Min's high spirits and lively heart-whole chatter, has given colour and animation to Jane's face. But the lines of the face have changed: the softness, the ineffable grace of earliest youth have fled from it for ever since that evening, four weeks ago, when she entered this very room, singing, laughing, full of careless, undoubting trust in the future, upon her husband's arm.

A form of iciest handshaking is gone through between the sisters-in-law. Then, each seating herself upon the edge of a chair, and keeping frightfully, uncompromisingly upright, the Miss Theobalds ask after their brother. With a little flush of the cheek, Jane answers that Theobald has been staying away from home; whereupon Miss Charlotte, who knows accurately where he is, and how long he has been there, inquires into details.

"Theobald is staying at the Folly," says Jane, in a voice of tolerably well assumed unconcern. "He has been over there the last three or four days with the Duke of Malta. But if you want to see him you will only have to wait a few minutes. Theobald is to be here in time to take my sister and me to the races."

A pause: Anne Theobald fidgets with her bonnet-strings, glances up at the demoralised Cupids, clears her throat, then begins some remark as to "the weather having cooled down since the rain, but——"

"I came here to speak to Francis on a *most disagreeable* subject," interrupts Charlotte, her eyes still rivetted on Jane's face. "But in his absence I suppose I must say what I have got to say to you alone. Indeed, I don't know but that it is best so. You are going to the races, it appears. And to the race ball afterwards? So I conclude." A sniff for every full stop. "Anybody can go there who likes. There are never any Lady Patronesses for the race ball."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, that is a great advantage," says Jane, bravely. "Lady Patronesses remind me of Ladies' Committees, and Ladies' Committees remind me of black-balling."

"I should have thought you would require nothing to remind you of that! Ahem. It is four weeks last Saturday since you and Francis entered this house."

"Four weeks last Saturday!" echoes Jane; bitterly recollecting what new experiences of life she has gained during those four fatal weeks.

"I said to my brother then, in your presence, that as long as you remained in the neighbourhood I hoped we should never have cause for painful discussions on any subject. In hoping this I was a fool. Mrs. Francis Theobald," bringing out each syllable with cruel stinging emphasis, "do you, can you, by any effort, should you think, bring yourself to understand the meaning of the word 'disgrace'?"

Forth flashes the mutinous spirit from Jane's blue eyes. "If I understand? Upon my word I don't know what you are talking about. If I understand the meaning of plain English? To the best of my belief—yes."

("We have lived in Chalkshire for more than two hundred years," interpolates the elder Miss Theobald, plaintively, "and respected by everybody, high and low. I'm sure when poor mamma died we sent out more than one hundred and twenty visiting cards of thanks for inquiries, and all the people of the humbler class besides.")

"Because if you do, you will want little enlightening as to the motive of our visit. The Theobalds, for generations past, have borne a good name, and kept up an honourable position in this county. You have lived here exactly four weeks and three days, and in those four weeks and three days have succeeded in dragging our name and our honour into the mud."

"I!" exclaims Jane, every nerve in her body tingling with sudden passion. "I!"

"Yes, you. But if you will hear me to the end, if you will have the goodness to command yourself, you will find that I do my best to judge you righteously. You don't belong—plain speaking in a matter like this is quick speaking—you don't belong in any way to the world that condemns you here. And I try to believe, for my brother's sake, and from a sense of my obligations as a Christian, I try to believe that the scandal you have occasioned has been brought about partly through ignorance. As a Christian, I say, I try to believe this."

"You are most considerate, I am sure," exclaims Jane, with quivering lips.

"My sister, of course, was for going to the seaside—shirking the pain of our position, as persons of a certain disposition do shirk all responsibilities, and leaving things to take their chance. But I," says Miss Charlotte, with animus, "am no coward! I will never shirk a trial, however dark, that Providence in its wisdom may choose to send me. Whatever you do, to whatever you may sink, you will still be my brother's wife. And I shall no more think myself entitled to disown you than if your conduct were honest, your reputation unsullied."

At the word "honest" Jane Theobald rises to her feet. She rises, stands before her sisters-in-law erect, and speaks out her answer thus. Jane has great dramatic power by nature. Her attitude, her face, are at this moment really fine. Every syllable she utters, though her voice is scarcely raised to common speaking pitch, falls with extraordinary point and power on her hearers' ears.

"I do not belong to your world, you say, to the world of your Chalkshire society! No, I do not. I belong by birth, by bringing up, by every strongest affection I have, to the class of poor, hard-working people—strolling actors, orchestra-people, ballet-girls, vagabonds of all kinds. I say this with pride. As far as want of hypocrisy can entitle any man or woman to the name 'honest,' my world is an honester one, far, than the world of Chalkshire society."

At these fearful words the elder Miss Theobald feels herself actually to shrivel. She has the narrowest bit of a soul that ever mortal absorbed in contemplation of its own gastric imperfections possessed; it is not so much intolerant towards, as utterly incomprehensive of the wants, and sorrows, and frailties of lives alien to her own. That ballet-girls, strolling actors, and other dreadful vagrant creatures of the kind exist, Anne Theobald knows to be a fact—a dark but undeniable fact. That such creatures should seek to justify their existence, feel no shame in it, unblushingly exalt it above a recognised, clerically-organised, aristocratically-headed county society, literally stuns her.

"We should have done much better to go to Scarborough—I told you so, Charlotte, and Mrs. Adams' lodgings not let! I told you any attempt at interference on our part would be worse than useless."

"You always tell me that what involves exertion to yourself will be worse than useless, Anne," says Miss Charlotte, with an expression of verjuice. "Pray, if we are not going to stand by our brother's wife in her downfall, who will stand by her? What's the use of kneeling and bemoaning our lot as miserable sinners in church every Sunday, if we abandon the miserable sinners most nearly connected with our own family to their fate?"

Jane's face becomes as red as fire. "Really, before this agreeable conversation goes any further, I think I must beg for a little enlighten-

ment," she cries. "Evidently I am the miserable sinner you speak of with such relish. In what consists my sin? What is my 'dishonesty' of conduct? What is the 'scandal' I have occasioned in the neighbourhood?"

The muscles round poor Anne Theobald's dust-coloured lips twitch convulsively. "We are sorely chastened, but we should have accepted the chastisement humbly," she remarks. "We should have done better, far, to go to Scarborough!"

"What you ask is natural," says Miss Charlotte, addressing Jane with cold equity. "I wish to be just to all men. I will repeat to your face, verbatim, what is said of you behind your back. In the first place there were the discreditable circumstances attending your meeting with the Crosbies, in Spa. That stamped you to begin with. Next came your intimacy here with young Rawdon Crosbie—at that time an engaged man—though unvisited by the ladies of the family. You were then seen with him, I believe with some person of your own connection, at a public supper-room in London. And then you were blackballed by the Lidlington Croquet Club."

Anne Theobald's lips again murmur forth something. But the words "Mrs. Adams" and "Scarborough" are alone audible.

"On Saturday evening last, Rawdon Crosbie came down from London, and (not going near his own people) visited you, here, between the hours of eight and ten, your husband absent. It is also said the Duke of Malta is becoming a constant visitor at your house."

Miss Charlotte pauses, a little out of breath.

"But still, of what am I accused?" asks Jane, not moving from her position. "All this I take to be the prologue—the opening flourish. Of what am I accused?"

"You are accused of conduct unbefitting your name and our brother's station!" cries Anne Theobald, for once in her life startled into decision. "And I did think you would have received our visit in a better spirit—we, who have never had the carriage out on a race-day before . . . . I'm sure Thomas must have thought of poor Mamma as he drove us along—but of course we know that there is such a thing as Higher Duty. Any one of the actions my sister has named is sufficient justification to Society for its verdict on you. No one ought, no one could, visit a woman setting public opinion at nought as you do."

"No one does visit me," says Jane, coolly. "Society has told me pretty plainly that I don't belong to it: I ask to be judged by somthing a little higher than Society's opinions."

"A little higher," gasps Anne Theobald, faintly.

"Yes, a little higher. I ask to be judged by the right and wrong of things. In the world I come from we may be lax, we *are* lax of conduct, most of us, and we know it. But what is wrong for one is wrong for all. What is right for one is right for all. We don't shut our eyes in some cases and open them in others. You, ladies and gentlemen by birth, our betters, our masters, have, it seems, a sliding scale—a very sliding scale," cries poor Jane, "of virtue! What was my first sin against Chalkshire respectability? That I was not a certain dilapidated old foreign princess that Mrs. Crosbie wished to scrape acquaintance with at Spa. My second? That I and my sister, an actress, were not ashamed to be seen at a supper-room in London, where Mrs. Crosbie was not ashamed to be seen herself. My third? That the Lidlington Croquet Club blackballed me! The Lidlington Club that, they say, has long striven in vain for the honour of having a Lady Rose Golightly amongst its members. And this is justice?"

She laughs, a scornful miserable little laugh enough, and the elder Miss Theobald rises from her chair.

"I think you might have spared us this," she cries in a trembling voice. "Dispute the first principle of morality—call wrong right and right wrong if you choose. You might at least, I think, abstain from maligning the society you have outraged."

"And I," says Miss Charlotte, laying a thin hand on each of her knees, "I think it would be much better, Anne, if all this useless talk on abstract subjects were left on one side. What justice is there in the world, I should like to know? None! There's a law for the rich and a law for the poor. A law for men and a law for women. A law for the well-born, a law for those who are not. We are as much hypocrites here in Chalkshire as anywhere else. But all that has nothing to do with the common-sense of things. I will not talk goody talk on a question that I know to be one of expediency. Lady Rose Golightly may do as she chooses, and float still, as she always has floated, because she is Lady Rose Golightly. If you," turning harshly to Jane, "continue to act as you are acting now, you'll go to the Dickens! Take my warning, or leave it. I have fulfilled my duty; and I am ready to stand by you if I can. Anne, we may return home." And with a more vigorous sniff than usual, Miss Charlotte Theobald starts to her feet; then, followed closely and in silence by the elder sister, moves towards the door.

With her heart swelling until the sensation is one of agony, Jane stands and watches them. Harsh, unwomanly, unpitying though Charlotte Theobald may be, Charlotte Theobald's *is*, she feels, the one human hand outstretched upon this earth to save her. And she half yearns to grasp it! Miss Theobald's cold platitudes did but kindle her into fiercer rebellion: the coarse sincerity of Miss Charlotte's "You are going to the Dickens!" has all but pierced her heart. "I—I am sorry Theobald is not at home," she cries, a visible tremor in her voice.

"I am sorry for it, too," says Charlotte, with bitter emphasis. "I am sorry your husband does not keep at home. Excuses enough are made for his conduct by the world: not by me.

Placed as you are, young, ignorant as you are, I say—though I know I stand alone in my opinion—that Francis's sin is the greater of the two."

At these words, words probing to the bottom that hidden, cruellest wound under which she languishes, Jane remains mute; the colour leaving her cheek, her eyes fixed intently, piteously, upon Charlotte Theobald's hard face.

"Don't—don't say anything against Theobald, please," she falters out at last.

"Oh, I say nothing against anybody," answers Charlotte, tartly. "I confine myself to facts. Lady Rose was the ruin of his youth. All the world knows that. After Lady Rose Beaudesert jilted him, Francis never cared a straw again for his family or his honour, or what became of either. She will be the ruin of him now. Men never outlive these idiotic sorts of infatuation!" cries Miss Charlotte, with an angry sniff over the generalisation.

"I'm sure I wish Francis would let the house and go away somewhere," says the elder sister, Jane remaining silent and passive under this new form of attack. "It was a dreadful mistake, his ever returning to a neighbourhood where he was known. Whichever way one turns one sees nothing but unpleasantness. Whichever way one turns disgrace . . ."

. . . Looks one suddenly straight in the face, in the gaily-dressed, smiling person of Miss Minnie Arundel! "Theobald has come, Jenny!" cries Min, bursting into the room, with the most delightful self-possession and good-temper. "He drove up by the stable-road, and has gone to change his coat, and where can I find him some blue gauze for his hat? Theobald says we shall not have much time to lose."

The severe goddess of good taste has not, it must be confessed, presided over Miss Minnie Arundel's race attire. It is a rare thing, indeed, for the poor little hard-worked actress to get a holiday, except on Sunday, and when she does get one she celebrates it by as elaborate a display of finery as her finances for the time being enable her to command. Flounces, furbelows, paniers, the latest absurdity of a Regent Street bonnet, jewels of different kinds on throat and wrist, pearl powder, millefleur, patchouli! What an apparition to enter the stately drawing-room, to stand beneath the hallowed, carved ceiling of Theobalds! Our brother's wife is, alas, an actress; but indirectly; by training only. Here is the veritable thing, fresh—or faded, as you will—from the footlights of last night, surrounded by the very living, breathing corruption of the atmosphere of the stage.

Charlotte Theobald gives her an acrid stare, just as she would give an acrid stare to any woman younger, fairer, happier than herself. The soul of Anne Theobald is, if I may use the irreverent metaphor, literally taken off its legs. After regarding life, on principle, for half a century as a respectable but melancholy process through which the human race has to moulder, patiently dyspeptic, into another world, now to be brought into closest contact, under one's very roof-tree, with—an actress! A creature "with borrowed colour and curl," whose business it is, professionally, to put a false light and glitter and gloss on human life, and whose triumphs consist in enabling men, for a brief space, to forget the tomb, indigestion, and other conditions of mortality; a creature with "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," for her acknowledged motto; and whose place in the great scheme of a decorously-organised universe is nowhere! I say, to be thrown thus suddenly across this living, over-drest, pearl-powdered antithesis to every belief and prejudice of her being, takes Anne Theobald's tottering soul off its legs.

"Come, Charlotte, come," she gasps, putting her hand on her sister's arm, as if for support. "We have been here too long already."

But Charlotte Theobald walks back a step, and looks once more into Jane's face. "Good-bye to you," she says, and gives her her thin right hand. The word heartiness would be misapplied to any action of Charlotte Theobald's; but there is honesty, a certain kind of remote sympathy even, in its grip. "It isn't likely I should pay another visit to Theobalds under present circumstances; but when you want a friend—mind what I say—when you want a friend, and the time may come sooner than you think—you'll know where to find one."

And then the sisters depart.

This is the last compromise between Jane's two lives; her last, cold hand-shake, so to speak, with the world of conventionality to which she was not born, and which, from this day forth, shall be burthened by her presence no more.

CHAPTER XXXV

WIVES—AND HUSBANDS!

A broiling sun overhead, dust in your eyes, nostrils, throat; men with blackened faces and banjos; small girls in dingy spangles holding forth tin cups, with shrill professional whine; dishonest directors of itinerant roulette boards! honest country merchants of cholera-ripe plums and apples; the bill vendors with their "Cards of the running 'orses, weights, name, *and* colours of the riders;" the mob, with its hoarse throat, ever ready to yell down the latest failure, or to yell in the latest success (like some other more highly cultivated mobs). Is not the description of one race course the description of all?

To Miss Minnie Arundel the day is one of unalloyed delight. She loves, she doats on races at all times, and has quite an amazing little stock of "horsey" expressions, which she fits in, generally upside-down, to show her knowledge of everything that is going on to the young men with whom she talks. But the delights of the Chalkshire race-course exceed any that she has tasted even on the classic ground of Epsom, Ascot, or Goodwood. Officers of all grades of

the service, London swells, and even titles of moderate rank, have held Miss Arundel's champagne-glass and lost gloves to her before now. Never until this first day of August, 187—, and upon this Chalkshire race-course, did she taste the supreme ecstatic sweets of a duke's attention!

Actresses are but mortal, very mortal; and when we consider that every lady, young and old, here present would welcome the Duke of Malta's attendance by her carriage side in breathless triumph, we should really be lenient in our judgments upon poor Min.

"Am I to call him my Lord Duke, or your Highness, or what, Jenny?" she whispers to Jane, after the first flurry of introduction. "These things may all come easy enough to you with Theobald for a coach, but remember I never spoke to anything higher than a baronet in my life."

"Call him what you like, my dear," is Jane's answer, "so long as you take him off my hands. Only, don't let him go, Min! We may not enjoy ourselves particularly. That we can't help. But ours shall be the best attended carriage on the race-course. Don't let the Duke go."

And well does Miss Arundel succeed in carrying out the letter and spirit of the injunction. While private carriages stand in a row, their occupants neglected, Francis Theobald's hack sociable is surrounded. Not once during the day, save so far as a cat may allow a mouse to get back its liberty, is the Duke let go.

This is how women of Jane's temperament walk on to perdition. Their hearts may be breaking with love or jealousy; Jane's heart is breaking to-day! But they will show a brave front before the transgressor, before their sisters, before the world. If they are to die, it shall be in harness. Some vanity shall be gratified, some duke shall not be "let go" till the last.

What cares Jane in truth for the Duke of Malta, Colonel Mauleverer, Brabazon—for any of the men whom, by a smile, a word, a look, she manages to keep in attendance? Why, if she followed inclination, she would sooner talk to young Rawdon than to any of them—Rawdon, jealously hovering round, but seldom approaching her carriage—sooner still would be left alone. If she were alone must not Theobald, of very necessity, keep by her side? Ah, but the Chalkshire world is looking at her; Mrs. Coventry Brown's carriage is actually next to the hack sociable; Lady Rose Golightly's not twenty yards distant. And Theobald himself—shall not Theobald be taught by his own vision that, though he neglect her, other men do not; that, let his faithlessness, his indifference, be what they may, the means of reprisal lie, fatally ready, to her hand?

Theobald, during the early part of the day at least, keeps aloof from Lady Rose Golightly's carriage, and near his wife's. Whatever anger he felt against poor Jenny for her obstinacy about the note, died before Lady Rose's dinner reached its second course last Saturday. He drove up to Theobalds this morning in the perfectly affectionate and conciliatory frame of mind that good husbands are wont to feel after short absences from home. And Jane's reception of him, Jane's changed face, the way in which, Miss Arundel being present, she tolerated, but shrank from his kiss, have touched him much more deeply than Jane herself suspects.

As long as the world lasts the difficulty of women understanding and making allowance for men's feelings, in matters pertaining to love, will probably be one of the great sources of darkness and confusion in the social arrangement of things. A woman loving a man, Jane loving Francis Theobald, *could not*, after a quarrel, exist three days away from him (two miles distant) and seek no reconciliation. But Francis Theobald, who loves Jane quite as much, I should say, as most men love their wives, has not only existed unreconciled, but happy; nay, has very nearly forgotten that the quarrel ever took place. The renewal of his old flirtation with Lady Rose has amused Mr. Theobald a little; his *écarté* with Lady Rose's brother has amused him a good deal more. The French cook, the wines, the general lotus-eating life of Beaudesert's Folly have, in every way, been an agreeable episode to befall one in these Chalkshire wilds. Still, what—so Mr. Theobald would argue—what has any of this got to do with Jane?—his sweet and blooming Jane, *his* wife, *his* property? As well think he would love Blossy less because he had been amusing himself pleasantly for a few days away from home! But how bring the property, above all, if it be property, of Jane's illogical temper, to understand this?

Mr. Theobald keeps near his wife's carriage; more than once, when a vacancy occurs, gets possession of a place beside Jane.

"Forgive me, Jenny," he whispers to her at last, several little jests and complimentary speeches on her appearance having fallen blankly to the ground; "I see you are angry about something or another—forgive me!"—holding out a lavender-gloved hand that the crowd sees not, but that Jane sees, of reconciliation.

In every quarrel of their lives, hitherto, Mr. Theobald has not needed to sue long for pardon. A word, a look of his, has been enough to bring Jane, always, with passionate repentance, to his arms. But jealousy, save of the most trivial and ridiculous nature, has never been the cause of their dissensions till now.

"I don't know what you mean by 'forgive.'" She lowers her parasol, so that no one but Theobald can see her face or hear her voice. "You have taken your way, I shall take mine. It's too late in the day to talk about forgiveness now."

"Jenny! Too late ever to talk of forgiveness between you and me?"

Every fibre of her heart thrills to his voice. If they were alone, instead of with these thousands of eyes around them, who knows but that salvation might come to her, even yet?

"Jenny, my love, before the day is over, you'll promise to forgive me, won't you?" And Mr.

Theobald's hand shifts its position, and, accidentally or otherwise, touches his wife's arm.

Such miracles as take place around us, to which no one gives heed! Here, under the open eyes of Chalkshire, is a tender little love scene going on between man and wife, between Mr. and Mrs. Theobald, of all couples in the world!

"I cannot forgive . . . . . without conditions . . ." says poor Jane, her breath coming thick and fast——

"——Mrs. Theobald, what do you say to lunch?" asks the old Colonel's chirpy Irish voice. "Sorry to disturb you, Theobald—thanks." Mr. Theobald, like a well-bred husband, retiring the moment his place is wanted. "If you and Miss Arundel are ready to honour us with your presence? The cup race won't come off for another half-hour, and this is the hottest time of the day. It will refresh you to get under shelter."

Colonel Mauleverer opens the door of the sociable. Jane and her sister descend, and walk down the course to the tent of the regiment, some twenty or thirty yards distant. Jane is escorted by Colonel Mauleverer, the Duke of Malta on her other side; Brabazon brings Miss Minnie Arundel. Certainly they are the two "best attended" women on the course. The moral sense of Chalkshire is scandalised by this flagrant setting at nought of public opinion. Young men, in these days, seem to have forgotten the A B C of good manners. Impossible for a regiment to receive more attention than has been received by this one from families of the highest standing in the neighbourhood. And see the return they make for it! Persons of unenviable notoriety openly invited to lunch before a lady present has received an invitation! Will anyone enter the regimental marquee *second* to Mrs. Francis Theobald and her sister? On this point the moral sense of Chalkshire maintains wise silence until the moment of temptation comes.

The marquee is just a degree or two hotter than the race-course; but the lunch, the iced champagne, are unexceptionable, and Min is soon in the seventh heaven of demonstrative enjoyment. A colonel of a regiment cutting her chicken, a duke replenishing and again replenishing her champagne glass! Can life have any brighter half-hour in store for Miss Minnie Arundel! If Blanche Bolingbroke, who boasts so ridiculously of the one lord of her acquaintance, could but see her! But there is a single drop wanting in every cup of mortal happiness.

"You are eating nothing, Mrs. Theobald," says kind little Captain Brabazon, who has made his way to Jane's side. "I'm afraid this black hole of ours is too hot for you. Come over by the doorway, where you'll have more air."

"I don't know what you mean by 'nothing,'" says Jane. "I've been eating steadily ever since I came. Lobster salad? Well, if there's one temptation more than another that's too strong for me, it's lobster salad—just the smallest help, though."

"And come over by the doorway. You will have as much draught as you like there."

"Yes, by Jove, it's the only cool place going," cries that most foolish of ensigns, Dolly Standish, edging up to Jane as Brabazon goes away with her plate. "I haven't been able to speak to you to-day, Mrs. Theobald; other fellows never gave me a chance. Theobald coming to lunch with us, I hope? Oh, no! there he is, opposite, in Lady Rose's carriage."

Jane raises her eyes, and blushes as though she were convicted of a crime. Yes, there is Theobald, placidly eating his chicken and drinking his champagne in the society of Lady Rose, Colonel Desmond, and Loo Childers, to outward seeming as well-assorted a little party of four as could be found upon the race-course.

"I take it for granted that you will belong to us at the races to-morrow?" Lady Rose said to Theobald when she parted from him last night. It was settled that he must leave Beaudesert at an hour next morning when not the very warmest friendship could make Lady Rose Golightly visible. "Although you say differently, you must remember that I look upon you as my guest still, and I take it for granted that you will lunch with us at the races to-morrow."

And Theobald, who, through Brabazon, had already heard of Jane's engagement, answered with a dubious "Yes." He was not responsible, no head of a family could be responsible, for what might happen in any given interval. But if the Fates proved favourable, and if everybody lived, and if Lady Rose remained of the same mind still, he would be charmed.

Well, everybody has lived, and Lady Rose has remained of the same mind, and the Fates, it may be assumed, have proved favourable. At all events, he is "her guest" still.

How could it be otherwise? When Jane and Miss Arundel, with their staff of attendants, walked away to the marquee, what was Theobald to do? Keep guard over the empty carriage till their return! Form an insignificant unit in the train of his wife's admirers! Jealous wives forget the positions into which their own love of attention, their own levity, may force the most exemplary husbands. The only course open to Mr. Theobald was to saunter up to Lady Rose; be met with honey-sweet smiles of welcome; finally, under gently imperious command, take his place in her carriage, have a snowy white damask placed over his knees, and eat, drink, and be merry, as his wife is doing in the regimental marquee almost immediately opposite.

"I would go and ask Theobald to join us, only he looks so happy where he is," says the foolish ensign. "A pity to disturb people when they are happy."

"A thousand pities!" cries Jane, her eyes kindling. "Particularly when everyone else is happy too."

She eats her lobster salad when Captain Brabazon brings it to her, takes a glass of champagne—another; begins to be in spirits.

Her clear outringing laugh makes itself heard across the course as far as Lady Rose Golightly's carriage.

"Our friends in the marquee seem to be having a *very* jovial party. I feel quite jealous at not being invited," says Lady Rose.

Her tone is the perfection of well-bred amiability. And still the "very" is italicised! Still, the next time poor Jane's laugh rings aloud, its merriment jars with a degree of discordance in Mr. Theobald's ears. However contented he may be in great things, however callous to the world's moral disapproval of his choice, a man who has married beneath him is never quite without some trivial vulnerable points. Lady Rose surely ought to know enough of human nature generally, and of Francis Theobald's nature in particular, to be aware of this.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A DAYLIGHT ORGIE

ONCE during the day, generally immediately before the cup race, it is a received Chalkshire opinion that ladies, well escorted, may be seen, for a quarter of an hour or so, on foot. Accordingly, while Jane and her sister are still in the marquee, some half-dozen of the Chalkshire notabilities pass backward and forward along the course; among them Mrs. Coventry Brown, with Mr. Crosbie—papa, not Rawdon—for her attendant swain.

The race-day is the one day of the year on which Mr. Crosbie is allowed to take his pleasure abroad as a bachelor, and "*moult tristement*" that pleasure is taken, if one may judge from the sombre expression of his honest red and tan old English face to-day.

The thermometer at the present hour of the afternoon stands at about a hundred and ten in the sun; and Mrs. Coventry Brown's too solid flesh is rapidly suffering decrease of tissue through evaporation. Her peach-coloured gloves—cruel enemies to Mrs. Coventry Brown, at all times, are kid gloves—seem to have grown a couple of sizes smaller than when she left home this morning; the white tulle that envelops her face becomes gelatinous; her brow is bedewed, her complexion redder than the roses in her bonnet. She is glad of any excuse to give her bulky limbs pause in their walk, and an excuse fortunately presents itself, in the hum of convivial voices, the peals of hearty laughter, that are issuing from the regimental marquee just as she and Mr. Crosbie pass along.

"A very uproarious party, upon my word—and of both sexes! But that's the worst of races, Mr. Crosbie. I always leave my own girls at home. In my position, as a head of society, I'm obliged to patronise the public amusements of the neighbourhood, but I always say a race-course is no place for the young and innocent."

"So people tell me," says old Crosbie. "So people tell me, Mrs. Brown. For my part I think all places are much the same. Everything depends upon the spirit you look at them in."

"Ah, my dear Mr. Crosbie"—the big blonde head gives a Lord Burleigh shake under its superimpendent flower garden—"that may be all very well, my dear friend, for you and me; but the young, the young, alas! are only too open to corrupt influences. Now, what"—Mrs. Coventry Brown's voice lowers, her great yellow eyes glare with feline fixity before her—"what do you call a scene like this?"

"Well, ma'am, I believe I should call it a rather noisy lunch party," says Mr. Crosbie, glancing towards the officers' tent and at a certain girlish figure that stands, with fair flushed face, a champagne glass in her hand, just within the entrance.

"And I," says Mrs. Coventry Brown, "should call it a orgie! Yes, a daylight orgie! Mr. Crosbie, you are a steward of these races. Then allow me to tell you this: I have seen the cup run for, as a dooty, and subscribed handsome to the race fund for years, but if this kind of thing is going to be tolerated publicly . . . how do you *do*, dear Lady Rose!" in a parenthesis of eager smiles, the great yellow eyes having succeeded in arresting a languid look of recognition from Lady Rose Golightly; "Miss Childers. delighted to see you looking so well . . . if this kind of loose manners is going to be tolerated publicly, Mr. Crosbie, the sooner persons of character withdraw their patronage from the Chalkshire races the better."

She returns to her carriage, but keeps Mr. Crosbie in solemn conversation for another five or six minutes after she has entered it; and when the poor old fellow leaves her, his face betokens pretty clearly what kind of agreeable utterances the oracle has been giving forth. He takes a turn or two along the course, his hands behind him, his eyes moodily fixed on the ground, then walks up abruptly to his son (who, as Mrs. Coventry Brown took care to point out, is always to be found in Jane's neighbourhood), and, for the first time to-day, addresses him point blank.

"I should be glad to have a few words with you, Rawdon, if you have five minutes to spare."

"Five minutes or an hour," answers Rawdon promptly. "It seems to me the races lag a little, father; don't you think so? Too long an interval between each race—or what is it?"

Old Crosbie answers, crustily, that the races are conducted as they always have been and as they always will be, while he has anything to do with them. He wants no new-fangled opinions upon any matter that is under his control and management. However, he puts his hand with a friendly enough gesture, within young Rawdon's arm, and thus linked together, the father and son walk away towards a quieter portion of the course.

Very glad the Chalkshire world is to see that they are upon *speaking terms* still. Mrs. Crosbie will not admit her son to her presence—did you

not know that? Oh dear, yes—he has not been near The Hawthorns, although, unhappily, he still comes into the neighbourhood! for a fortnight past—becomes hysterical if his name is even mentioned. And no wonder. Thirty thousand pounds, and as nice a girl as Emma, transferred, by the lad's own folly, to that ridiculous old Major Hervey. But the father, it seems, is more lenient—hopes still, perhaps, to patch matters up. At all events, it is a relief, a very great relief, to the charitable dispositions of the Chalkshire world, to see that poor Mr. Crosbie and his son speak still!

"Rawdon," says Mr. Crosbie, as soon as they find themselves among the ginger-beer stalls and Aunt Sallies of the back regions, and well beyond the range of friendly listening ears, "this is not the time or place I should have chosen for speaking to you; but as you don't come to my house I have no choice left, and what I have to say won't take very long. You are making a confounded idiot of yourself, sir!"

Rawdon is silent. From the time he was five years old he has been in the habit of disputing first principles with Mrs. Crosbie. With his father, his kindly, honest, narrow-minded, unintellectual old father, Rawdon is never able to find a word of argument.

"Yes, a confounded idiot! A confounded idiot!" Eloquence is not a natural gift of Mr. Crosbie's. "I am no more straight-laced than other men. You have never found me backward in indulgence towards any of your follies; no, nor in money either; and from the first, as I told your mother, I thought you too young to be engaged. Still, it was your own doing. You chose to propose to Emma, and she accepted you. Well, I won't talk of the delicacy or the generosity you should have felt towards a girl placed as she is in our house. Common manly feeling, common self-respect, might have made you behave yourself with *decency* as her lover."

"I was unaware that I had not behaved myself with decency," says Rawdon, but in no very firm voice. "Emma and my mother have taken up prejudices which I refuse to share; just that."

"It is not 'just that' at all," says old Crosbie, angrily. "For God's sake, let us have none of your fine rhodomontade hair-splitting, sir. Stick to the course you have taken, if you will. Don't defend it. This woman you have chosen to run after——"

"Say nothing against her!" cries Rawdon, flushing. "Say what you like of me, but not a word against her!"

"Have the civility to hear me out if you please, and you will find that I am going to say nothing against 'her!' This woman you have chosen to run after may, or may not, be what the neighbourhood says she is. The subject is one I've no interest in. As long as you were your own master you might have made a fool of yourself with her or any other woman you liked, and I should have trusted to time to give you wisdom. But an engaged man is not his own master. From the day in Spa on which you asked Emma to marry you you were bound in honour to respect her feelings, and on that very day, it seems, you fell into this—entanglement. Now what is the end of it? What is your position? What is the position of all of us at this moment?"

"My position," says Rawdon, with an uneasy attempt at a laugh, "is that of a jilted man. You must be aware—my letters to you must have made you aware—that the breaking off of the engagement was Emma's doing, solely."

"Emma's doing, solely! Would she—would any girl of spirit—remain bound to a man who openly, grossly, showed his indifference to her as you did? I don't talk of what happened in London," goes on Mr. Crosbie, who is not more ultramontane than other people as to the sinfulness of little sins; "I don't talk of their coming across you at those confounded supper-rooms, where that donkey, Hervey, should never have taken them, though that was bad enough in the eyes of an innocent girl like Emma; I speak of what happened before—the way in which you philandered after the woman here in Chalkshire, with Emma breaking her heart about you at home."

"Breaking her heart! Well, sir, you must allow, at least, that the wound has quickly healed! If Emma, in a fortnight, can derive comfort from Major Hervey's attentions, you must allow that I have not been the means of completely destroying her happiness!"

Now, those two syllables "Hervey" embody all the bitterest slumbering animosities of Mr. Crosbie's nature. For five-and-twenty years the poor man has been snubbed by the Herveys, has lent money to the Herveys, has been made to feel that if there be a point on which the Hervey glory *could* sustain tarnish or decrease, it has been in the connection of the family with himself. Rawdon's dislike to them is hereditary; one of those far-reaching mysterious taints in the blood which no counter-training can eradicate.

"Major Hervey! Yes, do you think that lessens my regret over your folly! For the last ten days I've had the fellow staying in my house—he's there, with Emma, now, afraid the heat on a provincial race-course would be too much for his complexion, I suppose. For ten days I've had the fellow in my house, drinking my claret with that confounded sneer of his, till I hate the thought of dinner, on my soul I do! Hate the thought of sitting down at my own table! And now there's the old woman coming—the two old women, by God! Maria's the worst of the two. If Emma marries him, I shall never be able to call my house my own again, and through you, sir! Through you, you young jackanapes! giving up as true and good-hearted a girl as ever lived, because you must needs make one in the train of a flaunting, flirting play-actress, like this Mrs. Theobald!"

The rebuke is not couched in very dignified terms, but it cut Rawdon's heart like a knife. A lad of his age may fall most insanely, most unlawfully in love without his whole moral

nature tumbling to pieces. Affection for his father, dislike, jealousy of the Herveys are feelings that have grown with Rawdon's growth, strengthened with his strength. Never did either hold more powerful sway over him than in this very hour when the rupture with all his boyish life, his boyish life and its prejudices and affections, is so imminent.

"I repeat, that it was Emma herself who broke off the engagement," he says, a little sullenly. "You know the story from the first as well as I do. When we met Mr. and Mrs. Theobald in Spa, you did not share my mother's prejudices against them, sir. If I recollect right, you said you would leave your card on Francis Theobald and his wife when they returned to Chalkshire."

"And what prevented me from doing so but your disgraceful conduct?" cries old Crosbie, angrier than ever. Like all men under petticoat government, he winces sorely at any allusion to his fetters. "She is not a woman for Emma to know—your mother was right about that—she and her goings on are a scandal to the neighbourhood; but for old friendship's sake, I would have left my card on the man himself, had your disgraceful conduct left me a choice in the matter."

For a minute or more young Rawdon makes no reply.

"You have used words I never thought to hear from you, father," he cries at last, in a queer constrained sort of voice. "But I suppose it is just as well we should understand each other thoroughly. I have kept away from home, hitherto——"

"You have! Think what the bitterness of that, alone, has been to your mother and to me! My son lurking about the neighbourhood (you were here on Saturday night—don't think your actions are not remarked) and ashamed to come to his own father's house!"

"For the present—until your feelings towards me become juster—I will keep away still. If . . . . if Emma marries Major Hervey, I suppose you and my mother will consider my 'disgrace' condoned?"

"When you give up your present connections, you mean—talk common sense—when you give up connections that are taking you to the devil—yes, to the devil, sir!—I have no doubt we shall have plenty of your company again. When temptation's over, and their prospects in life ruined, most young men turn filial and virtuous. We have all read the parable of the Prodigal Son!"

And with this ends the conversation. The tinkling of a bell announces that the horses are about to be saddled for the cup race, and arm linked in arm still, Mr. Crosbie and his son walk once more along the course, and before the eyes of the Chalkshire world.

"But if you want to know how things really stand between them, look at the expression of poor old Crosbie's face!" The charitable dispositions of Chalkshire find scope for action in the thought.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ALL THE FAULT OF THE CHAMPAGNE

Yes, Jane has taken champagne enough to be, I had almost written to feel, in spirits; three or four glasses, perhaps, not as much as Mrs. Coventry Brown would take at a ball or dinner party, but sufficient in the open air, and in Jane's high-strung mood of mind and body, to affect her potently.

But her pain, though deadened, is with her throughout the day. She attends, or has the air of attending, with interest to the races; under good advice "hedges," so that if scarlet-and-blue is second for the cup she gets a dozen pairs of gloves from Dolly Standish, and if scarlet-and-blue wins, three dozen pairs from the Duke of Malta, while if scarlet-and-blue is nowhere she wins gloves, more than she can count, from everybody. Her smiles are given to all the different competitors who surround her as lavishly as her bets are made. Never in her life has Jane Theobald looked fairer, neve has her beauty received more open homage from men; never have outside feminine critics been more justified, probably, in pronouncing her vain, fast, unvisitable.

And still through it all, through the flattery and excitement, through the noise and glare and intoxication of it all, her pain is with her still! She knows by keenest instinct, although her eyes cannot follow his movements, that Theobald remains constantly by Lady Rose, and her heart grows deader and deader. Almost, I think, might the Chalkshire world hold her sins expiated could they but fathom what this vain, fast, unvisitable woman suffers.

Theobald remains constantly by Lady Rose, not so much from any irresistible predilection for Lady Rose's society, as from the fact that it is less disagreeable to him to sit still in a luxurious carriage than to walk about under the broiling sun, and in the dirt, heat, and discomfort of a race-course. Horse-racing, perhaps I ought to say Chalkshire horse-racing, is a form of gambling Francis Theobald little affects; and —could Jane but know and understand!—he really finds it a sufficiently difficult matter to get through all this glare and din and dust with even a decent outward show of interest. Lady Rose, who, more years ago than she cares to remember, learned every turn of his face, every tone of his voice, by heart, knows that he is bored, better perhaps than he knows it himself; and a good hour and a half before the race programme is over, declares herself worn out by the heat and fatigue of the day, and ready to go.

"Our train starts at five-thirty, does it not?" she remarks carelessly, and addressing Colonel Desmond, who is standing on the other side of the carriage, looking over a lilliputian betting book with Miss Childers. "You know you have promised to be Bradshaw for the occasion. Five-thirty. Well, if we start for The Folly now, we shall not have too much time for getting

clean and having tea before we begin our journey. What do you say?" And she turns to Jane's husband. "Have you had dust and shouting and heat enough for one day, Mr. Theobald?"

About a fortnight ago, it may be remembered, on a starlight night, when a certain diamond ring sparkled on The Folly terrace, Lady Rose won a half-jesting promise from Theobald that he would join the yachting party of Lord Barty Beaudesert at Cowes. Without any formal renewal of the subject since it has grown to be a tacitly understood thing between them that the jest has become earnest. But the details of the plan have remained—have been purposely allowed by Lady Rose to remain—in obscurity.

"Mr. Theobald doesn't understand what you are talking about, Rose," remarks Loo Childers, who, among other duties of friendship, perfectly understands that of supplying the cue, or "leading up," to a desired subject upon occasion. "It was only this morning, you know, that you and the Duke settled it all."

"Of course—after getting Barty's telegram. What a vile memory mine is?" cries Lady Rose. "One of the many symptoms, I'm afraid, of approaching age. Yes, you are going to be carried forcibly away to the Isle of Wight to-night," and she looks again at Theobald. "A case of 'Novel and determined abduction' for the newspapers."

And then Lady Rose enters into explanations. After Mr. Theobald had left The Folly this morning a telegram arrived from Barty to say that some great amateur boat-race was to take place to-morrow off Cowes—any number of thousand pounds a side, all London coming down, great excitement of the season—and an immediate adjournment from Chalkshire to the Isle of Wight had been voted by everybody.

"You, as one of the household, included, Mr. Theobald," cries Loo Childers. "I made myself your proxy, and gave a plumper for you on the spot. Now it's no use for you to struggle," adds Loo, looking at him bewitchingly, and Loo can look very bewitchingly at any man when she likes. "We are all going off together this evening. Colonel Desmond, the Duke, Rose and I and you. And don't we mean to enjoy ourselves!"

Theobald answers, with Spartan promptness and decision, that it is impossible. He would be delighted, as far as inclination goes, but—it is impossible. He is going with his wife to the Lidlington race-ball to-night.

"Why, I thought your taste for balls met with a sudden death seven years ago?" remarks Lady Rose. "I thought you avoided all those sort of festivities on principle."

"Jenny does not avoid them," is Mr. Theobald's quiet answer, given in the tone of a man whose mind is not to be shaken.

"Ah, then I am dumb." A just perceptible change of colour comes over Lady Rose's face. "The duties of a chaperon before everything! I must confess, for my own part, the prospect of not going to the Lidlington ball is about the pleasantest part of our pleasant little programme. I shall think of you towards midnight, Mr. Theobald. Whatever else we are doing, we are pretty sure to be cool, and out of doors. And I shall think of you, *enjoying* yourself amongst all the crowded fashion and beauty of the Lidlington Town Hall!"

But she urges the point no more. Lady Rose understands the principles of social strategy too well to urge anything upon an indolent man like Francis Theobald. Why, sooner than be put to the trouble of resisting, he would, likelier than not, take flight at once, and find shelter at his wife's side during the remainder of the day.

Lady Rose urges nothing; only, when the horses are in her carriage, proposes that Mr. Theobald shall drive with herself and Miss Childers as far as Beaudesert. Colonel Desmond, who has bets on the next race, has arranged to return somewhat later on the dog-cart with the Duke. Will Mr. Theobald take pity on her and Loo, in their forsaken condition, and be their escort home?

"You are half my guest still," she pleads; one of Lady Rose's greatest gifts is her pleading power; "so I think I have the least little right to throw myself on your compassion!"

Well, Francis Theobald, though rigid as I have shown when principle is at stake, is not absolutely unassailable on all points. And in judging of his weakness at this particular moment—a critical moment, did he but know it, in his history—we should bear in mind that he is really bored to extinction, in his mild way, by the Chalkshire races; tempted to say "yes" to any proposal that shall involve instant quiet, cleanliness, and cooler air.

"The dog-cart can take you back to Theobalds as soon as Arthur and Colonel Desmond return," says Lady Rose, watching his face. "But of course you must go first and see if Mrs. Theobald can spare you. Loo and I will wait, in anxious expectation, till you return."

And accordingly, some two hours having elapsed since he left it, Theobald again makes his way to the sociable, and after a little patient waiting, *queue* fashion, among the crowd of young men who surround Jane and her sister, secures his place once more by his wife's side.

"Well, Jenny, my dear, how are you getting on? Won plenty of gloves, Min, I hope?" (this in friendly greeting to his sister-in-law). "I just came round to see when you will be thinking of going, Jane."

"Whenever you like to have the horses put to we shall be ready," Jane answers, with cold politeness.

"Oh, don't think of me. As long as you and Min are amused, stay. I—the fact is"—Mr. Theobald lowers his voice so that only his wife can hear it—"the fact is, I forgot to bring my portmanteau away this morning, Jane, and as Lady Rose has offered to drive me back to The Folly now, I think I may as well be off. I shall come over on the dog-cart to Theobalds afterwards, but if you don't like me to leave you——"

"Like!" interrupts Jane. Very low, very

well contained, is her voice, but a look of hatred —yes, of hatred—flashes upon him from her blue eyes. "And how do you suppose it can possibly matter to me whether you leave us here or not? Do you think we could not find plenty of people to take care of us, and see us home, too, if we wanted them!"

"I am quite sure you could," says Theobald, and he gives a glance at Min, who is at this moment holding a lively discussion with Dolly Standish and other youngsters of the regiment on some point, presumably connected with horse-racing; a discussion in which everybody seems to speak at once, and of which the predominant tone can only be accurately described by the word "loud."

Dolly Standish and his friends have evidently taken as much champagne as their modest allowance of brains can stand; poor Min is decidedly more rosy in the face, more noisy in her accents, than is compatible with the strictest refinement.

"I am quite sure you and your sister could, under any circumstances, find plenty of people to take care of you," repeats Mr. Theobald.

The tone of his voice, rather than the words themselves, the tone and a certain expression in the glance he gives Miss Arundel, cause all Jane's hardly pent-up passion to overflow.

'Lucky for us that we can!" she retorts bitterly. "I don't know how it may be for ladies, of course. Outsiders, like Min and me, do well to accept whatever attention comes to us."

A hot flush mounts over Francis Theobald's face. Since the renewal of his acquaintance with Lady Rose Golightly, the remembrance of Jane's lowly antecedents and connections has galled him, more times than one. And the sight of her at this moment, at poor, happy, unconscious Min's side, the audacity with which she utters that unpleasant word "outsiders," ably second the work that the influence of old refined associations has begun.

"You are a fool, Jane, and by God you'll live to repent your folly! If you have no self-respect, have the goodness to remember, please, that you owe something to me."

This is, in whispers. From the proximity of the two heads the world might really be justified in thinking that Theobald was committing the worst solecism in manners, a flirtation with his own wife!

"What I owe to you? Oh, I like that." Jane laughs; not a pleasant laugh to hear. "Surely you don't want a scene of powerful Domestic Interest before such an audience as this, do you?"

"I wish, once and for all, that you would drop your theatrical expressions," is Mr. Theobald's answer. "Do remember, if you can, Jane, that you have done with the sawdust and the footlights now."

"And suppose I have not done with them? . . . but why waste time with any more of this senseless talk? If you are not interested in the races, I am. Captain Brabazon," turning pointedly away from her husband, "will you lend me your card? Some one has stolen mine, and I can't remember whether I have taken odds or evens with Rawdon Crosbie for the Garrison Cup. Can you help me?"

Captain Brabazon leans across with his card and explains: two of the "odds" having been scratched, and another gone lame, Mrs. Theobald, by every canon of fair and equitable betting, must have taken "evens." Rawdon Crosbie's good sense will show him this, without any reference to cards or betting-books.

"Oh! And that is called honour!" cries Jane. "I learn some new meaning of words every day, now."

After this, whatever Mr. Theobald has to say must be said, whether he likes it or not, before an audience.

"Well, then, Jane," he remarks after a minute, "if you really think you can return without me I may as well start. I see Lady Rose's horses won't stand."

"Poor dear things!" says Jane, mockingly. "Don't keep them a minute longer than you can help."

"I shall be back in good time to dress. By-the-by, at what o'clock do we start for the ball?"

"I've ordered the usual shandrydan at half-past nine," is Jane's answer. "But why come back at all? Why not go direct from The Folly? It will take you out of your way, I'm afraid, to come all the way round by Theobalds."

"I had not thought of that. You are sure you would as soon go alone?"

"Oh, quite sure. Do whatever suits yourself best. I shan't expect you till I see you."

A suppressed smile passes over the faces of more than one of the listeners to the connubial colloquy.

"You are a very fashionable couple, upon my word!" cries Minnie Arundel. "When I get a husband, I know I shall take care how I allow him so much liberty."

And Theobald returns to Lady Rose. Never did her languid, high-bred smile, her thousand refinements of voice and manner, strike him with so marked a contrast as at this moment!

"You have got your leave, then?" she asks in a whisper, when Mr. Theobald has again taken his place in her carriage.

"Yes, I have got my leave," he answers. "Leave of a very elastic nature, if I like to avail myself of it."

In doubling, to get clear of the crowd, Lady Rose's coachman brings his horses close alongside of the Theobalds' sociable. Just then an old apple-woman gets in the way and is all but run over by the high-stepping greys; a crowd gathers round—with the ever-ready indignation of a British crowd against the bloated aristocracy they worship—the barouche must come to a standstill. For the space of one minute Lady Rose Golightly and Jane Theobald are separated by, at most, half-a-dozen feet.

"Who, in the world, are those flash-looking people Theobald has picked up?" asks Min, of the Duke of Malta.

"Those flash-looking people are my only sister and her most particular friend," answers his Grace, with a grin; thinking what a good story he will make afterwards of the actress's mistake.

Jane bursts out laughing. "You have put your foot into it nicely now, Min," she cries; then turns, and looks with cool, deliberate steadiness into Lady Rose Golightly's face.

Lady Rose's patrician head bows graciously. (Forgiving creature that she is! Think of bowing at all after that atrocious note of Mrs. Theobald's.) Jane's slight figure remains upright as a dart. Never was the cut direct given with more uncompromising point and directness. Mr. Theobald, who happens to have his eye-glass in use at the moment, evidently discerns what is going on; for he bends forward and says a word or two, very low in tone, very tender of manner, to his "hostess." Then the crowd separates—for a second the eyes of the two women meet: a look of intolerable triumph is in Lady Rose's; and the barouche sweeps on.

Not again, in this world, shall the two unequally matched rivals cross each other's path.

More dust and heat, and yelling of the crowd; more bets, more flirtation, more champagne. Oh, throbbing feverish torture of it all! will it never end? It ends at last. Miss Minnie Arundel, with whom, whatever pleasure she may be tasting, business is still paramount, looks suddenly at her watch, and finds, to her dismay, that she must start at once if she means to catch her train for London, and be in time for the first piece to-night.

"Oh, bother the first piece!" says the Duke of Malta, gracefully. By the time the day has advanced thus far, the Duke of Malta never for a moment leaves Jane's carriage. "Nobody ever thinks of being in time for first pieces. Stay over the race ball, of course—Mrs. Theobald will bring you—and I'll give you lots of dances." So, whatever the rest of the Beaudesert party may intend, his Grace, it seems, has not formed any definite resolution about going to Cowes to-night. "Manager make a row? Oh, bother the manager!" This is the style of his Grace's vinous talk. "I'll square it all off with him."

"Will you, indeed?" says Min, with a saucy glance at the Duke of Malta's red, half-tipsy face. "I don't think, as matters stand just at present, I should advise you to try the experiment. Rawdon, my dear boy," to Rawdon Crosbie, who is keeping jealous guard over the side of the carriage farthest from the Duke: "if you can find our coachman, and if, by any accident our coachman can stand, have the horses put to, and then see us through the crowd—there's a good child. I haven't a minute to lose."

Rawdon Crosbie finds out the coachman, fortunately still able to stand, then mounts the box, and escorts the sisters until they are clear of the race-course. He would escort them to the railway-station, and take Mrs. Theobald home, if he were allowed to do so. But Jane says no, and says it peremptorily.

"I have had ferocious looks enough from papa, as it is," she tells him, in her usual gay, half-bantering tone; "and shall probably get plenty more from the rest of the family before the day is out. I don't want to add to my crimes by being seen 'philandering' with you all over the country."

"Have you the slightest intention of giving me one dance to-night, Mrs. Theobald? I hardly like to ask, after the number I heard you promise to the Duke of Malta."

"Don't you, really? It seems you have grown very modest all at once. Yes; I can promise you just one solitary waltz, Mr. Crosbie—number five, if you like. Always supposing," adds Jane, cheerfully, "that I am admitted to the ball-room when the time comes! I have got my ticket, certainly—as Colonel Mauleverer is a steward, there was no difficulty about that—but how can I tell a regiment of old ladies, with Mesdames Coventry Brown and Pippin for generals, will not be ready to bar my entrance?"

But the moment the carriage drives on, the moment she is alone with her sister, all Jane's forced spirits fall to the ground. She sinks back in the carriage, lets the muscles of her face do what they will with themselves; she looks thirty years old. Despite the too visible wear and tear of the hardest profession in the world, you would *think*, seeing the sisters for the first time together at this moment, that Miss Minnie Arundel was the younger and happier of the two.

The train is already in sight when they reach the station; the platform is crowded. Only one more minute's hurried talk can they have together before Miss Arundel's departure.

"Min," cries Jane, with a sort of burst, and putting her feverish hand within her sister's arm, "you have seen a little, at least, of my life—my 'lady's life' we used to talk so grand about. Jolly one, isn't it?"

"It would be a jolly one to me, I know," answers Min, promptly. "I should say you've just got every single thing a woman could wish for."

"My heart's breaking, Min. On God's earth there doesn't walk a more miserable woman than me."

Something in the tone of her voice makes Min look seriously into Jane's flushed, faded face.

"It's all the fault of the champagne, Jenny. I've felt the same sort of thing scores of times. Champagne *doesn't* do by daylight. Take a soda as soon as you get home, with the tiniest little drop of brandy in it, and then lie down. You'll be right enough long before it's time to dress."

"Sometimes I think I'll cut it, Min—cut my 'lady's life'—and get my bread by the work I was brought up to do. Am I too old to go back to the stage, do you think? Looks are the thing, you know, for the ballet-going public, not art. And I haven't lost *them*. With a blonde wig and plenty of paint I might look tolerable in a break-down still?"

"You'd take the shine out of most of us, if you went back to the stage to-morrow, Jenny,"

cries warm-hearted little Min; "but you would be a fool ever to think of such a thing. With a husband to keep you, and means to bring up the child independent, how can you ever talk of toiling and slaving at the old life again for bread?"

"Bread is not everything," says Jane.

"Perhaps not," is Min's answer. "But bread, and meat, and a good glass of wine afterwards, and a house to live in, and a child and a husband, and as many silk dresses as one chooses to buy, are pretty nearly everything, I should say."

"As many silk dresses as one chooses to buy!" Are the women better or worse off in the main who can think, with poor ignorant Minnie Arundel, that this is the very crown and climax of all human prosperity?

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SOCIETY IN FULL DRESS

No army of old ladies receives Jane when, four or five hours later, she drives up to the brilliantly-lighted portico of the Lidlington assembly-rooms; only the pompous head-waiter of the town, in his way as "exclusive" a personage as Mrs. Coventry Brown is in hers, and almost as learned as that great oracle herself in the awful mysteries of social status and precedents.

"Carriages ordered at two," enunciated the Lidlington Jeames, in a voice suited to hired coachmen, to the driver of Jane's shandrydan. "Ladies' cloak-room to the left, madam, two steps down." This in a tone finely discriminative of the precise amount of condescension required by the occasion to Jane. In another minute "Mrs. Theobald's" name is shouted forth by waiter No. 2 at the door of the ball-room, and Jane finds herself in the august presence of Chalkshire society in full dress—society, bare-shouldered, short-sleeved, plumed—the feminine predominating over the masculine element in the proportion of about three to one.

It is late (till the very last moment Jane waited in her ball-dress and flowers at the hall door of Theobalds, hoping against hope that Theobald, at the eleventh hour, would relent and call for her). The second dance had been danced. Every available cavalier is walking about the ball-room, his partner on his arm. A few old gentlemen stand around the doorway, patiently gazing at nothing over each other's bald heads. Knots of ladies, old, young, and middle-aged, white, black, and coloured, are everywhere. Jane is alone.

She can never outwardly be awkward; thanks partly to the liberal gifts of nature, partly to her early professional training in that hardest of all arts to be learnt—the art of standing gracefully at ease. As self-possessed as though she were simply inspecting the house in some interval of the ballet, Jane stands, her fair arms folded in the airiest of attitudes, a composed smile on her lips, and looks about her—her heart beating till it seems to her her tulles and laces can scarcely conceal its beats—upon Chalkshire society taking its pleasure. Theobald is not here yet, nor any of the party from Beaudesert, neither is Rawdon Crosbie; so much she sees at a glance. But Mrs. Crosbie and Emma, Adonis Hervey, the Pippins, Mrs. Coventry Brown, all the enemy, in force, are present, and she must stand alone, the cruel cordon of moral quarantine stretched around her, and face them.

Right fearlessly does she do it. Colonel Mauleverer, with Lady Laurie, the wife of the member, upon his arm, passes her close; and Jane looks exactly one inch above his head. She will recognise no man to-night—promptly she decides on this—she will recognise no man so long as he has a lady on his arm! Captain Brabazon goes by with a Miss Coventry Brown—she sees him not. Presently approach Mrs. Crosbie and Adonis. Mrs. Crosbie's eyes, a little too consciously, seek the farther pole; Adonis, from under his heavy lids, gives Jane one of his usual satyr-like glances of admiration. She is calmly, superbly unaware of their existence! Alone, unsupported, not a muscle of her face betraying that she feels her isolation, she stands thus for three or four minutes—stands till the premonitory notes of the next dance set young men at liberty to follow their own inclinations, and places young ladies under the sheltering wing of chaperons.

Men are braver—oh, constitutionally, braver far than women; but then theirs is courage, oftenest, of a grand and thrilling and heroic pattern; courage that the world hears of. Under the small lessons read to them by their sisters, I think women are called upon to show endurance dumbly that men know nothing of. What man, undeserving of obloquy, ever went through a five minutes' or a five seconds' ordeal like unto this?

Aspirant partners throng round Jane eagerly. If a common ball-room triumph were all the success she coveted, she might have it cheaply enough. But Jane—the worse for her—dreams of another sort of victory. Once again . . . must I write it?—for the *last* time, as she drove hither through the silent lonely lanes, Jane's better angel pleaded to her on Francis Theobald's behalf: "Are husbands of the same flesh and blood as wives?" said the friendly monitor. "If a man err, is it not his masculine, god-like right, that he should be sued to rather than forgiven? Can any wrong-doing, any infidelity of his place him, as it would you, beyond the reach of pardon? By your own obstinacy, your own jealous madness, are you not giving over the game into Lady Rose's hands? Think twice of it, Jane. Think twice before you throw up the sponge to fate. To-night will be the turning-point. To-night you win or lose all" (oh! too prophetic monitor!). "Right is on your side, aye, and might, too, the might of youth, and beauty, and great love. Other champion than yourself have you none. Put away jealousy, pride; *resolve* to win your husband back; resolve to hold him when you have won him, and you must succeed."

Aspirant partners, I say, throng round her eagerly. She might fill her card half-a-dozen times over if she chose. But Jane does not choose. To-night, she thinks, is one of many possibilities. She will leave as many blanks as she writes down engagements in her programme.

"And only one square dance for me," says Dolly Standish, looking as if he could cry. The magic of Jane's blue eyes has robbed the little ensign of whatever wits he may before have possessed. "Only these miserable lancers for me?"

"If you behave very well, I will give you a waltz by-and-by," says Jane. "As to these miserable lancers, if you prefer looking on instead of dancing them, I shall be contented."

But Dolly Standish will not relinquish his chance of dancing, though it be only a square dance, with the prettiest woman in the room, and at once offers Mrs. Theobald his arm.

Few of the sets are as yet made up; and before Jane and her partner have walked a dozen steps, they are beset by Dolly's brother officers with inquiries as to *vis-à-vis* and side-couples. "That's all right," says Dolly, when the required number is filled in. "All nice people, I think, Mrs. Theobald. Bore having any but nice people in one's set, isn't it?"

And away he walks, in the ignorance and happiness of his heart, to the upper end of the room; there to wait, at Mrs. Theobald's side, for the nice people who are to be their fellow dancers.

But in social arrangements, such as the disposition of lancers, man—as Dolly Standish has yet to learn—holds but a subordinate and insignificant part in the order of creation. Their *vis-à-vis*, Colonel Mauleverer, keeps his engagement faithfully; Captain Brabazon, and some other officer of the regiment, keep theirs. But the set does not "form." One of the ladies, on seeing Jane, remembers that she had already promised to be *vis-à-vis* to her cousin. A second would prefer, as the night is warm, getting nearer the door. Bit by bit the set collapses, melts away into thin air; and Jane and Dolly Standish are left alone.

They try another, of which Emma and Adonis Hervey form part, and where a couple is palpably wanted; and with the same result.

Dolly Standish's mouth, always a little open, opens wider and wider. "I never saw such a —— extraordinary thing in my life!" says he; driven by the sincerity of his feelings into strong language.

"Never mind. You shall have a whole waltz to make up for it," says Jane, lightly. "Fortunately, one doesn't want a *vis-à-vis* for round dances, or you and I wouldn't have much chance, should we, Dolly?"

"I never saw such a —— extraordinary thing in my life," is all Dolly Standish can utter.

They sit out the lancers, perforce. Jane dances the next dance, a galop, with the Colonel, and just as it is finished, Rawdon Crosbie makes his appearance.

He walks bravely up, before his mother, Emma—the assembled world of Chalkshire—to Jane.

"Number five is mine, Mrs. Theobald; I have come exactly in time for it, I think."

Well, Reader, Jane's pride is smarting sore; how could it do otherwise, after the misadventure of the lancers? Here, in this Lidlington ball-room she is in the thick of her foes—in the heat of the battle. Mrs. Crosbie, Emma, Major Hervey confront her, at this very moment, face to face, and yet—yet she can show generosity! Shall we put it otherwise—descend off moral stilts, as she would say herself? At every instant she looks for Theobald's coming, with hope that is fast becoming passionate—looks forward to the victory she means to win to-night over Lady Rose; and uneasy conscience, inherent self instinct of "doing as we would be done by"—call it by a grand name or a paltry one—bids her act with magnanimity even to Emma Marsland.

"Number five is yours, or any other number you like. See," showing him her card; "I have left plenty of blanks in my programme. But Rawdon, my dear boy," this in a whisper, "I don't think you have any business to dance with me yet. I've been thinking over a good many things since I saw you this afternoon, and I am not going to call myself your friend, and help you to make a fool of yourself any longer. You must go and ask Miss Marsland for number five."

And she is obdurate, accepts Captain Brabazon, who comes up just at this moment to engage her for the waltz. Rawdon Crosbie has no choice but to obey.

Emma, with a rather empty card, is sitting beside Mrs. Crosbie, the venerable Adonis fluttering in attendance, at the farther end of the ball-room. The poor little girl's heart begins to thump violently as she sees her lover—can any quarrel, any estrangement, prevent Emma from regarding Rawdon as her lover?—approach.

"Oh, mamma, here is Rawdon, after all! How nice he looks! I never think anyone looks like Rawdon in a ball-room. Oh, I wonder if he will ask me? Mamma, I *must* dance with him if he does."

"Certainly, my dear Emma," answers Mrs. Crosbie in her most composed tone. "If your card is not full, give Rawdon a dance, certainly. Why not?"

Mrs. Crosbie is one of those delightfully narrow-minded women, the clog-wheels, the grand conservative force of the world, who never swerve aside from a principle or a theory once laid down. Shifty, broad-minded people, to whom the whole motley scene of our existence is one ever-changing, ever-perplexing problem, may, now and then, enlarge their definitions as occasion demands. If Mrs. Crosbie finds that her theories do not at any time cover the facts of life, she adopts the simpler plan of discarding such facts as do not fit in with Mrs. Crosbie's theories.

"Young women, whose sisters are small actresses, and whose uncles play trombones in orchestras, are persons whom society does not visit."

Mrs. Crosbie ennunciated this doctrine from the first, has acted up to it since—with the slightest disposition to waver when one was uncertain as to Lady Rose's line of conduct—holds to it now. She is by no means a woman devoid of maternal affection. To see Rawdon well married is the dearest wish of Mrs. Crosbie's heart, and many a tear, that not even Mr. Crosbie knows of, has she shed over the rupture of Rawdon's engagement. But not one sting of self-reproach has heightened her pain. A woman of colder feeling, it may be, but of larger comprehension, must inevitably have speculated sometimes as to whether she, herself, were not to blame. If, after the Czartoriska adventure in Spa, she had behaved towards the victim of the error with simplest charity, simplest decent justice, would Rawdon's sympathy ever have been enlisted upon the side of evil! Nay, would evil have existed at all had her own pious imagination not sedulously coined it? But questions of this kind are to Mrs. Crosbie unknown. Had Lady Rose Golightly really and seriously taken up Mrs. Theobald's acquaintance, a reconstruction of one's moral code might have been forced upon one. . . . But that is past. And everyone in the neighbourhood says that Mrs. Crosbie's conduct has been beautiful, taking poor Emma's heart so entirely, although we know what a *mother's heart* must prompt! And if Rawdon is to lose the one great matrimonial chance of his life, is it not better our dear Alfred should profit by the misfortune than another? And whatever chastening Providence may see fit to assign us, if we know that we have met it in a right spirit, know that we have acted as is usual for persons in a refined class of life to act, can we not at least bear our sufferings with conscience undisturbed?

"Certainly, give Rawdon a dance, my dear Emmy. A family dissension should never be allowed to show itself before the world. You agree with me, Alfred?" touching Major Hervey's arm with her fan. "It is wiser and better on every account that Emma should be seen to dance with Rawdon as usual?"

Adonis, raising his eyelids by about a hair's breadth, gives an "um" and an "aw," and a glance of tender reproach, that he feels must be irresistible, at the heiress. But Emma's heart is in her mouth. She hears, sees Rawdon only; and the glance is lost upon her.

"You are late, Rawdon. We half thought you might have returned to town. Your father told us he did not observe you when he left the course."

Mrs. Crosbie's tone is in nowise different to what it would be if they had parted amicably at luncheon; she extends her hand courteously to her son. Poor Mrs. Crosbie! She loves the lad, I repeat, with such faculty of loving as Heaven has bestowed upon her, and the moment, doubt it not, is bitter to her. But nature has compensations for us all. Is not Chalkshire society looking on? Must not Chalkshire society be saying how admirably collected, how Christian, how well-bred is Mrs. Crosbie's demeanour? Considerations like these lend a sweetness and a dignity to every hard but well-performed duty of human life.

"Well, yes, I am rather late," says Rawdon, whose face is burning under his sense of guilt, or of shyness, or both. "The flyman's fault . . . had to take the Pippins first . . . obliged to drive slow because Mrs. Pippin was afraid of the corners. I—I hope, Emmy"—standing upright as a ramrod while he prefers the request—"that you have a dance you can spare me?"

Hardly knowing what she does, and without answering a word, Emma jumps up. Another minute, and Rawdon's arm is round her waist, and they are whirling away amidst the crowd of waltzers, while Major Hervey is left to pull down his whiskers, elevate his eyebrows, and otherwise maintain his small dignity, as best he can, at Mrs. Crosbie's side.

Rawdon waltzes on and on, as though he never would leave off. He knows that leaving off means conversation; and, in their present agitating position, conversation with Emma Marsland is not a thing to be encountered lightly. Emma, however, at the best of times not a Taglioni, is ere long physically unable to endure this strain upon her powers. "I can't go a step further, Rawdon! I'm as giddy . . . oh, *do* stop."

And when they stop she is forced, if she would keep herself from falling, to cling to his arm with a vigour that puts sentimental embarrassments out of the question. Oh, in spite of giddiness, how blissful this waltz with Rawdon is! What a different feeling one has, somehow, towards a lover of two-and-twenty and a lover of fifty-three! Oh, if Mrs. Theobald would but die, or leave the country, or anything, how nice it would be to forgive Rawdon, and wear one's wedding-dress for the right bridegroom after all!

"There are a good many people here to-night," says Rawdon, looking straight before him into his partner's face, as he makes this brilliant remark.

"Yes, a good many. Seventeen more than last year, Mrs. Pippin says."

"I half thought I might have seen you at the races to-day, Emma?"

"I should like to have gone. Mrs. Coventry Brown offered to take me, but mamma and Major Hervey said I should find the sun too hot, and I didn't want to get my face blistered for this evening."

"It's—it's very pleasant for you and me to be dancing together again, Emmy?"

No answer.

"Emmy, forgive me for what I am going to say. I have no right to interfere, but I can't help it. Don't make another mistake, my dear. I am sufficiently your brother, am I not, to entitle me to say that? Don't make another mistake."

"Mistake!" falters Emma, her fingers closing tighter on Rawdon's arm. "Do you mean——"

"I mean," answers Rawdon—he whispers, but every word falls clear and distinct on Emma's heart—"I mean, after very rightly discarding a young fool who was not worthy of you, Emma, don't take an old one who may be less worthy still. That is all. Now, let us have another turn. You are not angry with me for what I have said?"

Angry! Why, what she longs for is that he would say more, that he would take back his forfeited right to guide, control every action of her life! Emma has, however, been too thoroughly trained in all little conventional feminine falsities to give outward signs of relenting. Rawdon has sinned. It is Rawdon's place, Rawdon's duty, to plead for pardon. But oh! how freely the pardon would be granted should he plead for it!

And the waltz goes on, and he pleads for nothing, not even for another dance. The waltz ends, and they walk about the room together, chatting and laughing almost as in old days. (So much so, indeed, that the world infers Rawdon Crosbie is coming to his senses; was it likely Mrs. Crosbie's son would throw away thirty thousand pounds in earnest?) Then Rawdon takes Emma back to her place and to Major Hervey, stands dutifully attentive to his mother for about the space of two minutes; finally bows himself away with as good a grace as he can command, and—goes at once in search of Mrs. Theobald.

He finds her in the refreshment-room with Captain Brabazon—a little circle of attendant red-coats fluttering around.

"I have kept the next dance for you, Mr. Crosbie," cries Jane, when Rawdon draws near. "Don't break my heart by telling me you are engaged for it?"

"I am engaged for nothing," says Rawdon, displaying his empty card. "Number five was promised me by someone, and I was thrown over. It's my fate to be thrown over, Mrs. Theobald."

"Poor, interesting, blighted being! Well, you shan't be thrown over any more—at least, not for number six. And it's a quadrille, too—a dance involving *vis-à-vis*. That makes it all the more flattering that I remembered to keep it for you."

But Jane has not the slightest intention, really, of dancing number six with anybody. When Captain Brabazon has gone away to dance his duty dance of the evening with Lady Laurie, she tells Rawdon the story of the Lancers; quietly, but with a certain tremble about the lips that he has learnt to interpret; and adds that she has no wish just now to brave any more square dances. Under different circumstances, towards the end of the evening, perhaps, with some very distinguished and imposing partner, she may be tempted to try her fate again. At present she prefers returning to the ball-room—if Rawdon will be so good as to take her there—and looking on. This is the first time, he must recollect, that she has ever been in a full-dress assemblage of English ladies and gentlemen. Uneducated savage that she is, has she not got everything to see and learn?

Well, they return to the ball-room, and Jane's "looking on" speedily resolves itself into eager watchfulness of the doorway. Every time there is the stir of a new arrival her tell-tale face shows its impatience. She answers "Yes" and "No," haphazard, to half young Rawdon says.

"If I could muster sufficient courage to be impertinent, I should ask who it is?" he remarks at last. "He who runs may read that Mrs. Theobald is expecting someone."

"I should think Mrs. Theobald *was* expecting someone," answers Jane, readily. "You don't suppose I would come to a provincial ball to dance with commoners all night? I am expecting his Grace the Duke of Malta every minute."

"The Duke of Malta!" cries Rawdon, not without a spice of malice. "Why, they all left for the Isle of Wight ages ago. You may look incredulous, Mrs. Theobald, but it's a fact—tl last important and authentic Chalkshire news. Someone told me of it just as I was coming away from the hotel. Lady Rose and her whole party left Beaudesert for the Isle of Wight this evening."

The colour dies on Jane's cheek. "I don't understand you—I don't understand what you mean by 'her whole party,'" she is beginning: but even while the words are upon her lips a reassuring sight cuts her short—the sight of the Duke of Malta's rosy face, rendered doubly rosy by his white tie and waistcoat (and the fact of having dined), just within the doorway.

"So much for the last important and authentic Chalkshire news, Mr. Crosbie! Lady Rose and her party are not in the Isle of Wight, you see, after all."

"The Duke of Malta is not," says Rawdon, a little coolly. "We will wait to see about the rest."

"The rest are not far behind, depend upon it." And in her jealous imagination Jane already pictures the entrance of Lady Rose, smiling, odiously triumphant, on Mr. Theobald's arm.

But no Lady Rose, no Mr. Theobald appears. His Grace, seeing Mrs. Theobald, advances at once, regardless of assiduous waiters, of bowing stewards, to meet her; and before he utters a word Jane's heart knows the truth.

The Duke of Malta is alone.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"YOUR SWEET LITTLE YES."

It is a rare occurrence for any of the Beaudesert family to patronise the race-ball, and a thrill of pleasure runs through every feminine breast, old and young, at his Grace's unexpected appearance. Mammas glance at their daughters; daughters glance at the state of their gloves

and flounces, while each rapidly sums up her own personal chance of securing the Duke for a partner. The Duke takes not the slightest notice of any human creature in the room, save and except her for whose sake he came here—Jane.

"You have left plenty of blanks for me on your card, I hope, Mrs. Theobald?" The Duke of Malta's utterance is—well, is not clearer than when we saw him last: has he not dined meanwhile? "Never forgive you if you haven't kept me lots of dances. Got all sorts of penitential messages for you—a note somewhere—oh, no, I bade them send the note round to Theobalds. He's off, you know?"

"Off!" repeats Jane. "What are you talking about? Who's off?"

"Why, Theobald, of course. Don't faint. Rose carried him away, whether he liked it or not. Plucky little woman, my sister Rose, when she sets her mind on a thing. And there was Loo and Desmond—they wanted me to go, too, or they were civil enough to say so; but I wouldn't have spoilt the pleasant little party for the world. Besides," adds the Duke, with as much tender expression as his very husky voice can compass, "I prefer being here, Mrs. Theobald."

"You show your taste," says Jane, in a curious, cool sort of manner with curiously untrembling lips.

"They have gone down to Barty—my brother Barty, you know. I suppose Mr. Theobald told you?"

"Mr. Theobald told me nothing."

"Barty is at Cowes with his yacht, and they have gone to join him there—*for the present*," adds his Grace, in a tone of after-dinner playfulness. "I expect to hear they are all off to the Mediterranean, or Norway, or somewhere, in a day or two. Fine thing for the Chalkshire papers, won't it be? 'Grand Sensational Elopement in High Life?—More than one Respectable Family plunged into Grief!' Depend upon it, we shall see the whole story in the 'Lidlington Looker-on,' to-morrow morning. Capital joke—eh?"

"A most capital joke," says Jane.

Rawdon Crosbie has retired into the background, and she stands with the Duke of Malta, alone—stands, it is not too much to say, the observed of every pair of eyes in this Lidlington ball-room. His Grace, after a minute, takes her programme in his hand, and begins scrawling his noble name down for the following waltz, and for every other vacant dance he can find; and Jane, smiling, looks over it with him, and remarks, "He can have as many as he likes, and welcome."

. . . Jane smiling! Yes—like one stricken in hot blood, who as yet shows not his hurt, the poor girl stands, with these hundred or so of people watching her face, and gives no sign, outwardly, of her death wound. No sign, outwardly; but, in less time than it has taken me to write, direst resolve, crude and wavering in her heart till now, has come to maturity.

What is a man's first, natural, "human" feeling when news equivalent to this news which Jane has got (or believes herself to have got) abruptly reaches him? The burning desire—so I am told—of vengeance. Well—women, though their passions be as water unto wine compared to those of men, *have* passions, and I suspect, in any great crisis, are apt to feel every whit as "humanly." Only, a woman's weapons are different. No pistol, no horsewhip for her; no banishment of the offender from hearth and home. But she can take, fair and young as this woman is—she can take deadlier vengeance still. And Jane has it in her to take it. Make no mistake about her character, because hitherto you have seen her light and frolicsome, and playing at life. Jane has it in her to take the black suicidal vengeance of reprisals. Theobald has deliberately left her for Lady Rose Golightly—such details as the Duke goes on whispering, half true, half purposely false, respecting the "Grand Sensational Elopement," leave no doubt upon her mind that the betrayal was premeditated. And Theobald's world—the world, oh monstrous injustice! that bows and cringes before Lady Rose Golightly—holds itself outraged by *her* appearance among its quadrilles and lancers to-night! How if she should justify that opinion, from a height, guilty though it be, that they shall envy still? How if she should pay back Theobald that which she owes him—aye, to the very image and superscription of the payment money?

"Ridiculous sight, a poor devil in a jealous fit!" remarks his Grace, presently, in one of his plethoric whispers. "Just as I was finishing dressing, they told me a young gentleman wanted to see me, Reverend Samuel Smylie. I didn't want to be bothered with any young gentleman, or Reverend Samuel Smylies either; however, he wouldn't go away, and so, after a time, I went down to the drawing-room and spoke to him. The curate was sitting by Loo's work-table, crying—honour, Mrs. Theobald, I am sure you won't believe, but 'tis true—crying till the tears ran down his nose, and with an open letter in his hand. Loo, it seems, had written—very pretty of her, I think—to say, 'Ta, ta, for ever,' and Smylie had rushed over, like a madman, just in time to find himself too late. I made matters as pleasant as I could for him, by saying there were extenuating circumstances. Desmond and she had been friends for years. She had jilted fifty other fellows for Desmond just in the same way—things of this kind always happened for the best, if you only knew it, *et cetera*. 'I would have given my life for her, your Grace!' cried the poor fool. 'I loved that girl, my God! and believed in her, and trusted her!' His face was the colour of a lemon; his hand twitched so that he could scarce hold the letter as he stood, blubbering, by the table where Loo and he used to carry on their spooning. Never saw such a ridiculous sight in my life!"

"I should think not!" says Jane, laughing aloud; "and are not likely to see such a sight

again. People like the Reverend Samuel Smylie should be put under a glass-case. They are too good for everyday use."

And then their waltz begins. The Duke of Malta, despite his weight and stature, waltzes to perfection, waltzes with a *verve*—I can find no adequate Saxon word—that he can scarcely have acquired, indeed, in Belgravian drawing-rooms. The town band, inspired by the knowledge that a duke's noble legs are moving in harmony to their strains, discourse to the utmost of their ability. And all Chalkshire is looking on! And Jane's cheeks—yes, though her heart is broken, though she is going to perdition fast as human creature can go—Jane's cheeks show a livelier scarlet, her young limbs move with feverish, quickened grace. Portly Chalkshire Lucretias—Lucretias safely anchored, half a century ago, in life's dullest matrimonial moorings—raise fans to their elderly faces rather than witness so demoralising a sight.

They dance this waltz; they sit out the next dance, a galop. Then succeeded lancers.

"You never commit any of these square abominations, I should hope?" remarks his Grace. He has found an armchair for Jane in one of the most conspicuous parts of the ballroom; he leans over her, holding her bouquet, and looking as devotedly gallant as a very hot and rather inebriated little man of twelve-stone six can look. "You never commit the atrocity of a square dance!"

'As a rule, never," answers Jane. "But I don't mind dancing this set of lancers with you. You meant to ask me for it, by-the-by, didn't you?"

"I meant, and I mean, to ask you for every dance to-night," is the Duke's answer. "At all events, I don't mean to ask anyone in the room *but* you."

'I should hope not, indeed," says Jane, with a little toss of her head; "I never think of accepting divided attentions!"

And we are to dance the lancers, you say?"

"Yes, we are to dance the lancers. But mind you get the best people in our set!—all the very heaviest Chalkshire swells."

And, five minutes later, behold Jane in the top set of the room, the other three ladies consisting of an archdeacon's daughter, Lady Laurie, and Mrs. Crosbie!

At all the public county balls it is Mrs. Crosbie's wont to walk through one square dance, if Sir John Laurie, the member, be present to ask her. Sir John Laurie is present, and has asked her to-night; and their engagement is for this particular set of lancers. And so—irony of fate!—Jane's hand and Mrs. Crosbie's meet; they bow, they curtsey, they 'visit" each other at last, under the Duke of Malta's auspices.

Mrs. Crosbie puts a smiling face upon the matter. "A public ball must always be a public ball, Sir John," she remarks, when, the lancers over, she makes the circuit of the room, all dignity, amber satin, and black lace, upon the member's arm. "The position was embarrassing, certainly; but in these cases—in these cases," says Mrs. Crosbie, with delightful humility, "I never take upon myself to assume the initiative. Had dear Lady Laurie thought it advisable to withdraw from the set, I should of course have followed her example without hesitation, and have left the Duke and Mrs. Francis Theobald alone."

"Mrs. Francis Theobald is an uncommonly pretty woman," remarks old Sir John.

Quadrille and waltz; lancers, galop, and quadrille; much ear-rending music; much blood-poisoning carbonic acid; much reducing of tulle and tarlatan to rags; some few light hearts, it may be, among the crowd; some tragically heavy ones: thus the Lidlington race-ball, Jane's last successful appearance before the Chalkshire public, runs its appointed course.

Under no circumstances of life could Emma Marsland feel actually tragic, just as she could never, in her lightest moment, rise to actual farce. But about as intensely, blankly miserable as the Drawing-room Comedy of her existence will admit of, she does feel to-night. She gets a fair number of duty partners—poor Emmy—and Adonis is her devoted slave! Never for a moment, during the intervals of dancing, are Major Hervey's soft flatteries and wiry whiskers away from the heiress's ear. And still Emma is miserable. She has been trying sedulously, during the past wretched fortnight, to like Adonis and to leave off liking Rawdon. Rawdon, so her best friends say, has behaved with an absence of right principle that makes her escape *a mercy*. Rawdon never proposed for herself, but for her money. He has paraded his shameless admiration for Mrs. Theobald, and her own humiliation, before the eyes of the whole county. And Emma, in return, loves him a little better than ever! And all that her heart trembles, yearns for, is reconciliation. And Rawdon will not come near her. Rawdon, lugubrious of face and mien, passes his evening in dancing with partners like the Browns and Pippins, or in moodily hanging about such doorways as command a view of the adjoining sitting-out room. (A room in which, as the night progresses, Mrs. Theobald and the Duke of Malta chiefly remain: his Grace talking low and earnestly, getting soberer, evidently, as he talks—Jane listening in silence: not shrinking from the whispers of her companion as though she loathed them, or from the glances of any who pass as though they stabbed her; but with the strangest look all the time upon her flushed face—a kind of wild, *hunted* look, the like of which I hope you, Reader, may never be called upon to see on any human face—knowing yourself to be one of the hunters!)

"Our young Rawdon does not seem in very high feather to-night, Emmy." It has got to be a matter of course, during the past week, that Major Hervey shall call the heiress "Emmy." "Not in such high spirits as when we came upon him and his friends that night at Wilcocks's. You remember?"

"Is it likely I should forget, Major Hervey?" cries Emma, who is at last beginning to have doubts concerning the perfect delicacy and disinterestedness of Major Hervey's conduct.

"But 'women like moths,' you know, Emmy; women like moths—ever caught by glare! Yes, begad—the same, all of you; anything with a title! Moths—glare-um-er-aw." (I like, now and then, to transcribe Major Hervey faithfully.) "His Grace quite cut Rawdon out—best thing that could happen to him, poor fellow! No real harm in Rawdon—deficiency in brain, perhaps—not an uncommon deficiency." In another minute and a half Major Hervey means to propose, and be accepted. He can afford to be generously compassionate of tone towards Emma's discarded lover. "Warned him from the first—most dangerous of all associates—demi-monde, and *not* demi-monde! Duke of Malta quite cut him out. Deuced good thing for everybody—except the Duke of Malta."

Emma turns her head away, impatiently. She has wavered perpetually, during the past fortnight, in her feelings towards her elderly adorer; one day faintly liking, the next faintly disliking him, the next, perhaps, neither liking nor disliking. As he maunders on now—suddenly the revelation comes upon Emma's heart—she knows that he is absolutely obnoxious to her! Marry this cynical, dried-up old mummy of a Bond Street lounger, live his life of eternal pleasureless pleasure, fasten oneself on, with infinite humiliating pains, to the draggled skirts of aristocratic London society, and almost, perhaps, in time, be counted Someone! Far rather would Emma make her thirty thousand pounds a free gift to Major Hervey, marry Rawdon Crosbie on a couple of hundred a year, and travel the world with him—scanty household goods, squalling babies, and all—on a baggage wagon.

So, you see, Emma's heart is in the right place still.

"*Except* the Duke of Malta," repeats Adonis, who evidently thinks he has said a good thing. "For him . . . . I present his Grace my felicitations! Emmy, my dear girl, we see this —er—too-charming Mrs. Theobald, for whose sake Rawdon has been so ready to quarrel with us all, in her true colours to-night."

"They are very becoming colours, then," says Emma, a little sharply. "Until to-night, I never really knew how handsome Mrs. Theobald was."

For—strange contradiction—Emma is disposed not only to leave off disliking Mrs. Theobald, but almost to become her champion, now that Mrs. Theobald has left off smiling exclusively on Rawdon Crosbie!

"Well—yes," drawls Adonis, raising his eyelids enough to glance across the room at Jane, who at this moment returns to the ballroom on the Duke of Malta's arm. "Fine grown young woman, enough, for those who admire the style. Never disconnect her, myself, from a vision of pink-paper hoops—sawdust—ambulating circus—shilling admittance. Flaring advertisement of Miss Aminta Fitz-Somebody, for the astounding backward-and-forward trick act. You agree with me, my dear Emma?"

"I think Mrs. Theobald one of the nicest looking women I ever saw in my life," says Miss Marsland.

"As you, Emmy, you, are the sweetest, the most generous! My feelings—er." Major Hervey's "ums" and "ers" almost impede his utterance at this tender and thrilling point. "My feelings, my dear Emma—as good a social position as any man in London—and unembarrassed—my poor mother, in the natural course of things, can't last for ever—known you, my dearest girl, from your infancy—to know is to love—can endure suspense no longer—await your sweet little 'Yes' in breathless anxiety?"

Major Hervey's cold old eyes have been fixed on the toes of his dapper little evening shoes during this impassioned declaration, so he continues in blissful ignorance of the expression of the heiress's face. Probably, if he saw it, he would continue in blissful ignorance of what that expression portended. That a Hervey—that he, the pink and flower of all the Herveys—could be rejected by a freckled young woman, with only thirty thousand pounds for her portion, and whose family is not even alluded to in the pages of the "Landed Gentry"—no, it must be plain language indeed that should bring fact as monstrous as this home to Alfred Hervey's belief!

"Your agitation is natural, charmingly natural," he whispers, turning to her with the most lover-like air of appropriation. "I have been too sudden—aw—the warmth, the impetuosity of my feelings! Fault of my character—just what Lady Carolina said to me the other day: 'My dear Major Hervey'—Lady Carolina is one of my oldest, dearest friends—'you are *too* ardent, *too* impulsive.' But I am forgiven by my little Emmy? Let me have one word, one whispered word, to say that I am forgiven?"

More unmistakably lover-like grows Major Hervey's manner. His whiskers tickle his little Emmy's ear; his withered old lips are within a couple of inches of her cheek. She looks up; she sees Rawdon's eyes, from the other end of the room, watching her earnestly. And all Emma's resolutions, if indeed they ever for a moment really wavered, became irrevocably fixed.

"I don't quite see what I can have to forgive, Major Hervey, but I forgive you all the same. I have had quarrelling enough of late to last me for the rest of my life."

"Quarrelling? Never, Emmy, between me and you!"

"No. What could we have to quarrel about? I was thinking of Rawdon."

Major Hervey is silent. Has she understood him, or has she not? Adonis looks doubtfully out of the corners of his eyes at the thirty thousand pounds—I mean at poor Emmy. He raises his scented handkerchief, with a graceful flourish, to his long nose—"ums," "ahs," clears his throat; then in the following fervent language, brings things to a point:—

"We shall live in town, of course—miserable if I live anywhere but in town. Nice little house near the parks. All the best people in London charmed to visit my wife—any girl must command a position as *my* wife. Out of the season stay about at country houses—asked to all the best country houses in England. My Emma will be glad of the advantages of a town life when she is married?"

"I—I shan't care a bit where I live when I am married," cries Emma, flaming scarlet, "so long as I marry the right person; and unless I do that I'll never marry at all, for no one can say I was an old maid *of necessity*, at least no one who knew about us here in Chalkshire."

Is the freckled young woman an utter fool? thinks Major Hervey, his old eyes growing wickeder and wickeder. Must one say, grossly, "Will you marry me, or will you not?" before she can sufficiently arouse from her wretched provincial stupefaction to answer!

"And am *I* not the right person?" he asks, this time throwing a tenderness impossible even for provincial stupidity to misinterpret into his voice.

"No, indeed, you are not," cries Emma, promptly. "If you won't let it pass as a joke, Major Hervey—if you insist on making me say disagreeable things—indeed you are not."

Adonis draws his small person together, as if he had had a galvanic shock.

"Your manner during the last ten days has been signally at variance with such a declaration," he remarks——

"——I know it has," interrupts Emma, beginning to fan herself desperately, and getting hot and confused. "I was so angry and so miserable after my quarrel with Rawdon; and, of course, I looked up to you almost like I do to mamma; and you were always ready to say hard things about Rawdon—yes, you were, Major Hervey—and I was wicked enough to be pleased to hear them; and now—now I think you would have been much more our friend if you had tried to smooth things over. If we hadn't all been so hard upon him, everything might have been set straight that morning he called in Bolton Row, and he has never been home for a fortnight; I'm sure papa looks at me sometimes as if he hated me, and I've been fond of him ever since I was a little girl," goes on poor Emmy, all without a vestige of punctuation; "and whatever Rawdon may feel I know I can never care for any other man in the world as I do for him and what's more I never mean to marry anyone else."

To this long outburst Adonis Hervey makes no immediate reply. Perhaps he has to command the impetuosity of his feelings as a rejected lover; certainly he has to get his breath after the stupendous, the inconceivable example of female obstinacy and ignorance which has been presented to him. When he does speak it is in his coldest, acridest voice, with the coldest, acridest expression of which the Hervey physiognomy is capable.

"And this is really your determination, my dear Miss Marsland—to wear the willow till you die, for the youth 'who loved and who rode away?'"

"I shall never care for anyone but Rawdon Crosbie," says Emma. Her round brown eyes are not lovely eyes in themselves, but they fill with tears of tenderness and repentance now, and *look* lovely. "And I will never marry anyone else. Of that I am determined."

Adonis rises to his feet, passes his fingers through his whiskers, and looks down with all the contempt his soul is capable of, at the poor infatuated, idiotic girl who has refused (Great Heaven! and the earth goes on in its appointed course!) to become the wife of Alfred Hervey!

"Faithful unto death, eh? Well, I must confess fidelity is one of the virtues I do not appreciate. Valuable bourgeois virtue, no doubt: but—um—aw—NEVER any bourgeois virtues in the Hervey family."

And, thus saying, leaves her.

He walks superciliously down the ball-room, his opera-hat under his arm, his own spruce little person bristling with self-consciousness as usual. He goes forth into the night, gets hold of the first hack-driver whom five shillings can bribe from his legitimate fare (even at this moment the Hervey instinct of money-saving is strong still; fain would Adonis have the job done for four-and-sixpence), and drives back to The Hawthorns, resolved to depart from Chalkshire and from all the infatuated idiots Chalkshire contains, by the earliest train to-morrow.

During his midnight drive, in this hour of stinging, unlooked-for disappointment, does it occur to Major Hervey that two kinds of prizes matrimonial may be drawn by a man for the comfort and solace of his declining years—one of money (in the drawing of which he has failed); the other of a save-all, or domestic bondslave, such as his own cousin Maria—a creature who, without wages, would cook for you, nurse you, fight the laundress, and in every other way stand between you and the depredations of the lower orders; be content with bachelor lodgings, never expect to accompany you to dinner parties, and yet at all times be ready to coach you up in well-invented dinner-stories relative to the greatness of your joint ancestors? I say, does the pale ghost of Maria's love, retributive, haunt Alfred Hervey in this his hour of humiliation and defeat?

Let us trust so, Reader. Let us trust that the one hope in existence even of a Maria Hervey may be realised.

CHAPTER XL.

"GOOD-BYE FOR EVER."

YET another "sin worth sinning," another dance worth dancing, is to fall to Rawdon Crosbie's share in this life.

Jane walks up to his side, without the Duke of Malta, and asks him for it herself—just as he

is standing, jealous, miserable, undecided whether he shall invite the least musical of the Miss Pippins for the ensuing waltz, or rush away from everybody, smoke a pipe of despair in the starlight, then return to his hotel, and have done with ladies and ladies' society *for ever*.

"Can I have the honour of this waltz, Mr. Crosbie? I see I may wait for ever if I wait until your highness condescends to ask me."

She looks beautiful, almost startlingly beautiful as she speaks—her lips smiling (Jane knows a good deal about that smiling art: before the foot-lights has she not seen ballet-girls practise it in the face of the most atrocious bodily tortures? here, on the stage of life, with adverse eyes—not those of a friendly public—watching her, shall she not show front as brave?); the hectic of her cheeks contrasting vividly with the marble of her round young neck and arms; her blue eyes all aglow with feverish light.

Rawdon looks at her like one who dreams—looks at her with a minglement of feelings that I find it hard to describe in words. She is nothing to him, and yet, as she stands here at his side, smiling into his face, and speaking to him with that voice of hers, she is everything. The past, that has been Francis Theobald's, the future, that may be—Rawdon does not ask himself what!—matter nothing. He, he alone in the world possesses the present moment, and will make the most of it. A man going to execution might surely drink with zest a draught of rarest wine offered him by some pitying hand upon his road!

She takes his arm; they stand for a minute or two in silence, and then the music begins, and they start. If Rawdon lives to be an old man, must not the keen pain, the keenest enjoyment, of the next five minutes remain—no dry mental record, but a warm and living sensation—in his memory? As the waltz proceeds, he goes again through every scene of their brief friendship. He remembers the first look Jane gave him on the promenade at Spa, the ball and the "Grande Duchesse Waltzes," the walk home in the perfumed summer moonlight, their supper beside the window, the ineffaceable picture of her as she stood, the half-dead roses in her hair, and smiled good-bye to him in the early morning on the staircase. He remembers the day of the Lidlington Flower Show, his jealousy, their walk—that for him might have been in Arcadia—among the flowers, and how they laughed and jested in the level sunlight! And the hours alone together in the silent garden of Theobalds, and the night at the Prince of Wales's, and the "sermon by gaslight" on the pavement of Maddox Street. . . .

And now all is over.

Just as unmistakably as a dying man knows that he is dying, Rawdon Crosbie knows that his ill-starred passion, with all it has given and all it has taken away, is in its death-agony. He is drinking the last dregs of the poison-cup, and the poison tastes like nectar to the last.

When the waltz is finished Jane declares herself tired, and instead of walking about the room on Rawdon's arm, takes possession of the first vacant chair that comes to hand, Rawdon placing himself at her side.

They are, as it chances, exactly opposite poor Emmy, who was partnerless during the last dance, and who is sitting in the same place where Adonis left her some quarter of an hour ago.

"Rawdon," cries Jane, *apropos* of nothing, and turning her eyes full upon the lad's face, "that waltz was our good-bye. Did you know it? Not the cut eternal—you and I will never come to a cut, Rawdon—but good-bye all the same. Well, when people go away, they sometimes ask a favour of the friend they leave, don't they? I want to ask a favour of you."

"Going away!" repeats Rawdon blankly. "And are you going away, Mrs. Theobald? Are you going to leave Chalkshire?"

"Yes, I'm going to leave Chalkshire. There was no great love between us from the beginning;" Jane has never read Shakspeare, but she has got a little stock of her own of stage quotations; "there was no great love between us from the beginning, and it has pleased God to decrease it on further acquaintance. Chalkshire air doesn't agree with me, so I'm going"—a quiver, as though some spasm of pain had seized her, contracts her lips—"I'm going to have a change from it. Well, that is not what I wanted to talk to you about. If I ask a favour of you, my dear boy, will you promise beforehand to grant it? You'll never repent it if you do, Rawdon; I haven't much good left in me, I know, but I'm not quite so vile as to want to hurt you. Will you promise?"

"Most faithfully," says Rawdon Crosbie, without a second's hesitation. "You should know that pretty well, I think, without going through the form of asking."

"Go this moment—no, not this moment, *I* want you for a little while longer—but go the moment you leave me to Miss Marsland, and try once more to set things straight: ask her once more to forgive you. She will not say 'No' to-night, I'll answer for that."

Rawdon Crosbie turns white to the very lips. "This—this is the last thing I should have expected you to ask me, Mrs. Theobald."

"No doubt of it," says Jane quietly. "But everything that is least to be expected *is* happening to-night. Did you see me dance my lancers, Mr. Crosbie? I was in the same set with Lady Laurie and a Miss Archdeacon, and your mamma! And the set did not melt away like the first one I tried with Dolly Standish, and the ladies all gave me the tips of their fingers, and managed not to faint. I have learnt a lesson by that, Rawdon, my dear. If one would rough-ride the prejudices of good English society, one must have a Duke of Malta, not a Dolly Standish, for one's partner."

She laughs rather loudly; Emma Marsland, across the room, can hear her. But 'tis a laugh from which all the old merriment, all the hearty

ring, which once made Jane's laugh so good a thing to listen to, has fled.

"And so, remembering the lancers, I think we may say that everything least likely to happen is happening to-night. Rawdon," after a second or two, "some day or another, a long time hence it may be, there's just one more thing I should be glad for you to do. But you needn't promise about this—do it only if it seems good to you. Some day or other, then, when you are a steady old married man, and when you are talking to your wife about the past, I should like you to say to her that, before I left Chalkshire, I, Jane Theobald, wished her happiness, and that if I ever gave her pain, I was sorry for it. Do you hear?"

"I hear," answers Rawdon, very low, and not once raising his eyes to Jane's face.

"And, without my making any fine company-speeches, my dear boy, you must take for granted all the good things I wish you! The only happy hours I ever had in Chalkshire were the hours I spent with you. I shall like, whatever becomes of me, to look back to them, and to remember how pluckily you used to stand my friend!" And now she goes on, a little hastily, "I don't know that there's anything more for us to talk about. 'Good-bye for ever' is a nasty thing to say, Rawdon, so we won't say it! We won't think that our 'good-bye for ever' is really being spoken at this moment."

"And I shall never feel that it has been spoken at all," says Rawdon, stoutly. "As long as we both of us live, Mrs. Theobald, I shall never feel that 'good-bye for ever' has been said between you and me."

"You think so now. The day will come—s, Rawdon, yes—the future is uncertain, impossible to say how any of us may turn out in the future, but the day will come, depend upon it, when you'll thank your stars 'good-bye for ever' *was* said between you and me; and then——Oh heaven! whatever we do, don't let us get lachrymose and sentimental!" With a sort of start Jane interrupts herself thus (almost within earshot, does not the Duke of Malta stand watching her?): "You'll want all that kind of sugary material, you know, child, for the grand reconciliation scene in which you and Miss Marsland are coming on! It won't be a very hard scene to act, take my word for it. People seldom fail in pleading when they really want to be pardoned. The question is, how am I, outside in the cold, to know that the pardon is spoken?"

She pauses for a minute, then selects a white moss rose-bud from the flowers she holds in her hand, and gives it to him.

"Here, take this, Rawdon—I have excellent eyes, I shall see it wherever I may be in the room—and wear it until the moment your sweetheart says 'Yes.' Then I, outside in the cold, must have my sign, and the sign shall be, that you take my flower, my last gift, alas! from your button-hole, and, in the agitation of your feelings, let it drop—accidentally, of course—at your sweetheart's feet. You promise?"

Before Rawdon has time to answer, the Duke of Malta advances to claim her, with such an expression of assured success, such a flush of triumph upon his vacuous Beaudesert face! Jane rises, takes his arm with a quick, half-sullen air of submission, then turns once more to Rawdon Crosbie.

"You promise me?" she repeats in a whisper. "I shall feel—well, about the only pleasure anything could give me to-night when I receive my sign."

And he promises. They are the last words ever spoken between them. Upon the Duke of Malta's arm Jane passes away among the crowd of dancers; and in another minute Rawdon Crosbie has taken the vacant chair by Emma Marsland's side.

In a poem or a play, men, at all stirring moments of the plot, express their feelings, I remark, in language artistically adequate to the occasion. In everyday commonplace reality, they talk everyday commonplace still: plead for their mistress's lost favour much in the same strain and tone as they would ask her to pass them the toast at breakfast—only that in asking for toast they would probably stammer rather less, and so approach a degree or two nearer to eloquence.

"What—not dancing, Emmy?" This is the observation with which Rawdon, his heart really torn by conflicting emotions, begins the scene that he knows must, one way or another, govern the course of his whole future life.

"No, I'm not dancing this time," says Emma; "I have danced as much as I wished to dance this evening."

"It's getting awfully hot, don't you think so?"

"Yes, but if the windows are open on both sides there is such a draught. It's better to be too hot than to sit in a draught."

"Well, perhaps it is. You won't give me another dance to-night, I suppose, Emma?"

"Yes, Rawdon, I will if you wish for one."

"I did not like to ask you sooner; I thought Adonis was sure to have filled all the vacant places in your programme."

"Poor dear Adonis!" What woman can speak of the man she has refused without some slight inflection of voice betraying his secret? "Adonis does not dance round dances, you know."

"And you will dance this galop with me, then?"

"I shall be very happy."

But neither of them rise, and both keep their eyes fixed rigidly straight before them, as people do who are conscious that they are not saying what they would like to say if they dared and knew how.

"Mrs. Theobald is looking very well to-night," remarks Emma, breaking the ice at last. "I mean as far as looks go. I—I'm sorry for her, Rawdon." Timidly poor Emma volunteers this, her first concession. "People are saying that Mr. Theobald has gone away and left her, and there's such a wretched look on her face all the time she is laughing and talking with the Duke."

"You can hardly expect a woman in her position, alone in a roomful of people who have shunted and blackballed her, to look very jolly," answers Rawdon.

"If I had to act the last few weeks over again, I know that I, for one, would behave very differently towards Mrs. Theobald—but it's no use looking back now. The past is past and done with!" And Emma gives a melancholy sigh as she thinks of the lovely wedding-dresses from Miss Fletcher's, the orange-blossoms, the Honiton veil (tried on in strictest confidence before one's eight bridesmaids), all locked away, painfully spotless, drearily intact, in the brand new portmanteaux and travelling-cases that were to have accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Rawdon Crosbie upon their wedding-tour.

"*Is* the past done with?" exclaims Rawdon. "Emma," and his voice trembles, "*is* the past, the time when we loved and trusted each other so well, gone by for ever between you and me?"

"Oh, Rawdon—oh, don't—oh, what would mamma think?—oh, I know the Pippins are looking!" cries Emma, her heart swelling with a sudden rapturous hope.

"I have been to blame in every way—a fool! I deserved to lose you; I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I ask it! Emma, thinking of yourself, and of your own happiness alone, not of any suffering your answer might cost me, is it possible you can say you pardon me? Is it possible there is room for me in your affection yet?"

And now comes to Rawdon Crosbie the most strangely-blent moment conceivable of pleasure and of pain. For Emma, such honest love, such tender womanly forgiveness upon her face as makes her more than pretty, falters "Yes;" and Jane, standing outside in the cold—just opposite the lovers, that is to say, animated and radiant on the Duke of Malta's arm—must have her sign! He takes the flower, as she bade him, from his button-hole, and holds it irresolutely.

"How odious I used to be about your bits of flower, your withered weeds!" cries Emma, presently—poor Emma, who feels in her immense new-born happiness that she can never blame herself enough for the jealousy through which that happiness was so nearly wrecked!

"I'm wiser now, Rawdon. I ask no impertinent questions about your white rosebud, although I can form a pretty shrewd guess who gave it you. Your button-hole was without adornment, sir, when we danced that miserable dance together at the beginning of the evening."

"I have danced with Lydia Pippin, Augusta Brown—with I don't know how many charming creatures since then," says Rawdon.

And Emmy seems contented. Just at this moment up comes Sir John Laurie to ask her for the following quadrille, the last square dance of the evening. Even in the first rose-flush of enraptured reconciliation, Emma cannot resist the honour of dancing with the county member; and as the good old gentleman, spectacles on nose, stands writing his name down on her programme, Rawdon gets an opportunity, unobserved, for giving Jane her sign.

In a crowded ball-room, everybody Argus-eyed, watching everybody else's affairs, 'tis wonderful how little is known really of what goes on among the different actors. Rawdon Crosbie is evidently trying to patch things up, wise young man, with the heiress, in Major Hervey's absence. *That* all the world has been observing during the past five minutes. Who should notice such a trivial action as his raising a morsel of half-dead flower to his lips, holding it to them with great tenderness for a second or two, then—his sunburnt, unsentimental face becoming livid the while—laying it gently down on the floor, just beside the hem of Miss Marsland's ball-dress, and letting it rest there? Who, I say, should notice such unimportant nonsense as all this?

"I'm sure I didn't want any other partner than you to-night," says Emmy, turning to her lover. "But one couldn't refuse Sir John—say, Rawdon, could one?"

"Perfectly impossible, my dear Emma. Now, the right thing, I suppose, for me is to solicit the honour of fat old Lady Laurie's hand, and be your *vis-à-vis?*"

"I hope you are not beginning to laugh at one, already, Rawdon?"

"Do I look in such a very laughing mood, then, Emma?"

And Emma, after glancing at his face, is forced to confess, a little bitterly, that he does not. Rawdon Crosbie, as I have before remarked, is no expert in the art of feigning emotion.

When the waltz is over, Mrs. Theobald begins to walk about on the Duke's arm; after a time, accidentally or otherwise, passes close to the lovers as they stand talking to Mrs. Crosbie at the upper end of the room. She gives Rawdon a furtive smile of congratulation that, with all its kindliness, cuts him to the heart. Then, Emma chancing at the moment to raise her head, the eyes of the two young women meet—meet, Emma Marsland may one day be glad to remember, with a look of forgiveness and reconciliation at last.

It is considered etiquette at the Lidlington public balls for "everybody" to leave together. Lady Laurie orders her carriage at two; Mrs. Coventry Brown and all minor luminaries order theirs at the same hour. After her quadrille with Sir John, Emma has one blissful round dance with her lover, then quits the ball-room on his arm; some bald-headed gentleman, of Chalkshire repute you may be sure, escorting Mrs. Crosbie—poor Mrs. Crosbie, ready to weep with maternal joy at the happy turn events have taken, but dignified and well-bred in her demeanour towards Providence to the last.

In the vestibule occurs the usual crush of cloaked and hooded ladies, and of gentlemen tripping themselves up over the ladies' trains. "Charming ball, was it not?" "Oh charming! Never saw your daughters look so well." "Good-night, *dear* Lady Laurie." "Hope you will not

suffer from the heat!" "Hope you will not suffer from the cold!" So the Chalkshire notables, treading on each other's satin toes, and murmuring platitudes in each other's tired faces, fight their way to the front, and vanish from the stage of this little drama.

"Mrs. Coventry Brown's carriage."

Forth steps the majestic woman, liker to a purring white cat than ever, with her swansdown cloak drawn up around her throat; the two youthful white cats, also in swansdown, following.

"Mrs. Pippin's carriage."

The watchful barn-door mamma, and her brood of elderly chickens, pass away out of our sight.

"Mrs. Crosbie's carriage."

No; the name, this time, has been shouted wrong. Mrs. Crosbie's carriage next but one.

"Mrs. Francis Theobald's carriage stops the way."

She flutters down the steps, in her white dress and flowers, at the Duke of Malta's side; the light from the lamps outside shining on her; flushed, successful—as women count success—yet with that same hunted look, of which I have spoken, upon her face still: a vision several persons among this Chalkshire assemblage are not likely to forget.

The Duke stands bareheaded, eagerly whispering to her for a minute or more after she is seated, heedless, it would seem, of the string of county carriages, whose progress Mrs. Francis Theobald's hack vehicle impedes.

He whispers more and more eagerly; Jane never answers. At last—"If you expect me to remember anything about it, you had better write the name down," she remarks in a cold hard sort of tone; Rawdon Crosbie is near enough to hear her words—"I never remembered a promise or an address in my life."

She hands the Duke her ball-programme; he scribbles a word or two on the back, and gives it to her again, with another last whisper.

And then the door of the carriage is shut, and Jane drives away, the Duke of Malta watching her progress, into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XLI

ALONG THE RAILROAD TO RUIN

Away into the darkness; back, through the hush and sweetness of the August night, *home*. Hannah, the nursemaid, the only watcher in the grim old house, Hannah, with nerves already shaken by rats and creaking boards, stares open-mouthed at the apparition of Mrs. Theobald's face; ghastly, now that it has cooled from the flush and excitement of the ball; the blue eyes weary, yet with an unnatural glow of fire in their weariness; the hair pushed back from the temples; the lips dry and scarlet; the whole expression of the face changed.

Will Mrs. Theobald please to take anything? Yes, Mrs. Theobald will take some brandy-and-water when she gets upstairs; the proportion of brandy not small, Hannah! And then she submits to having pins taken out, and flowers unfastened; submits to Hannah's talk, and—and wants nothing more! Wants nothing but to be left alone, within locked doors, the reflection of her own face in the looking-glass, the sight of Blossy, asleep and rosy in her cot, for company.

In the fine old days, when rack and thumbscrew were called in to the aid of orthodox social opinions, the accused, we read, did, after the first great wrench of nerve and muscle, feel little more; man's physical capacity for suffering being, thank Heaven, less boundless than man's capacity for inflicting it. Jane should have gone through the worst by now, if the same law hold good in the moral as in the material world, which unfortunately it does not.

"In the infinite spirit is room
For the pulse of an infinite pain."

She has been in torture throughout the evening; was in torture while she danced, smiled, planned, radiant with "success," the ruin of all her future years; is in torture now.

The room she and Theobald occupy is the same best or purple room to which her sister-in-law led her on the night when she first tasted respectability: there is the ghostly four-poster in which Cousin James died; there are the ghostly watch-pockets — there the two prim dressing-tables. Nothing altered outwardly. Only the life that then was in its spring laid low by sudden blight, only an unimportant unit about to be added to the sum of shipwrecked and abandoned human waifs with which the world's highways are overstocked!

Is it to be wondered at? Jane took her brandy-and-water at a draught as soon as the servant left her alone, and the result of the stimulant is —no merciful stupor, no kindly impairment of reason, but rather a quickened power of gauging her wretchedness to its depths. Is this crowning act of her history a thing in any way to wonder at? She remembers a score of children who learnt in the same class with her from Adolphe Dido, and who have most of them ended as she will—only with less noise and glitter. Some innate tendency of ballet-girls, probably, against which, now that the play of life begins to "work close," 'twere vain to struggle. One's fate; as well accept fate bravely; make no whine over it! And yet, and yet—what love, resurgent, what yearning towards all things right and honest, were in her heart four hours ago! What loathing, what abhorrence, for the future to which she tacitly stands committed, are in her heart now!

Taking her candle, she goes up to Blossy's cot and bends over, looking at her in a sort of blank despair. The child "features" Theobald, as the country-people say, and the likeness comes out strongest when sleep has shut the blue eyes, which are her sole resemblance to her mother. Theobald's fair hair and complexion, his forehead, his print of chin—Theobald's whole face

rises before Jane's sight, with cruel distinctness, as she looks at the baby-face of his little daughter. And she turns from her abruptly—yes, turns from her with a feeling wellnigh of hatred! How should I write the word, if I did not know that love and hatred, under the over-mastering influence of jealousy, are exchangeable terms?

She turns from the child, I say, and for an instant stands motionless; then, through a half-open door, walks into a small adjoining room—her husband's dressing-room. It is in disorder—Esther, the housemaid, having taken her day's junketing at the races—just as Mr. Theobald left it after dressing this morning. Three or four summer cravats, failures, are strewn about the dressing-table; the gloves in which he drove over from The Folly lie on the floor. She stoops and picks one of these gloves up, in I know not what passion of tenderness, clasps it tight—tight to her breast for a moment, then flings it from her with a gesture of abhorrence! Melodramatic, highly; but, coming from Jane, natural. If she were dying, the poor theatrical-nurtured girl must be theatrical still. After this—shutting and locking the door, as though she would lock *him* away from her thoughts with the action—she comes back to her room, and finishes undressing.

By now a faintest primrose tinge has begun to penetrate through the heavy window-curtains. Jane draws one back, and sees the world already entered upon a new day; sees the chill light resting on the hoar old elms round Theobalds, and on the faintly-outlined Chalk-downs, that were a thousand years before she was, and will be a thousand years after she has sinned and suffered her little hour and gone to sleep again. What matter her sorrows or her wrongs in this great system of things wherein she holds so poor a place? Of what account are they or she to anyone? . . . And then return to her mind the protestations of life-long devotion, the offers of riches, freedom, "position," which have been incessantly whispered in her ear throughout the evening. And though she loathes the offers and him who made them alike; more than this, though—with wisdom prematurely learnt in the sharpest of all schools—she appraises both protestations and offers at their exact value; it seems to her that there can be no going back now, that what is coming is not only inevitable, but best.

All times of revolution, in nations, or in a girl's ignorant heart, are times of lightning speed. Four hours ago, reckoning time by ordinary computation, Jane was swayed by one fierce passion, simply: in an access of jealousy, desired swift and sure and desperate retaliation upon one offender. She has gone through a whole lifetime since then; will be avenged, not only for her bruised and despised love's sake, not on Theobald only now, but on the world; will throw down the gauntlet, not merely to this Chalkshire respectability, which has flouted her, but to *all* respectability. (An old, ever-new story, Reader: society revolting against the class; the individual revolting against, and so justifying, society.) How puerile, childish, seems that scheme she once entertained of returning to the stage! What—go through the bitter toil, the heat, the cold, of that hardest slavery, to win the applause of a capricious public, the paltry earnings of some forty or fifty shillings a week; while Theobald, by good luck rid, without signal disgrace, of his encumbrance, might return, *honourably*, to the world that had found no place for her, the world of Lady Rose Golightly!

Work wants a sound heart. If at any time, while he loved and was faithful to her, Francis Theobald had happened to ruin himself utterly, yes, to the wanting of bread, never doubt that Jane would have gone back to the stage—short skirts, hard work, modest pay, and all—and have pirouetted bravely for his support, yes, and have had him wear fine lavender gloves and embroidered linen, and smoke the best attainable cigars, out of her poor superfluities!

That is just the sort of stuff she is made of.

Not now, not now!

She moves across to her dressing-table, where lie her soiled ball-gloves, her faded bouquet, her programme; she takes up this last, and looks down through the list of dances—each "Valse d'Amour" or "Galop Infernal" marking a station of her journey along the railroad to ruin! Then turns over to the other side, and, in the cold green daylight, reads the words the Duke wrote there in pencil, as he stood bare-headed, the county watching, I will not say envying, her "success," beside the door of her carriage.

Only three or four words: the address of a certain hotel in Brussels, with his Grace's initials scrawled in monogram underneath. But Jane's face turns suddenly ashen as she reads them. Pain, like pleasure, has its intoxications; pain, hitherto, has lifted her, in some measure, above the level of her guilt. The sight of those few words in the Duke's handwriting, and in her possession, makes her realise, with a shiver of actual bodily terror, *what* all this is that is befalling her.

God, can she escape, may she escape? Help her, if she be not already past the reach of help! She hides the programme out of sight in her dressing-table drawer—as though its secret could be deciphered by any eyes save her own—and going up to her bed, not to the side where Blossy lies asleep, stands, her ashen face growing more ashen, her cold hands clasped together rigidly; then falls down on her knees and tries to pray.

She and Min received what would be counted but a heathen kind of bringing-up from poor, strong-hearted, weak-headed Uncle Dick. When the children were young, however, Uncle Dick's wife did, in her scanty leisure, in her unenlightened way, teach these heaven-forsaken little theatre rats to go on their knees and repeat a certain form of words at night. And Jane has clung to the habit since; no power of

Theobald's, even, being able to shake her from what he has often called "the one mild hypocrisy" of her character.

Hypocrisy to Jane were a physical impossibility. Had Theobald used the word superstition, he might have been nearer the mark; for, in truth, the "prayer" which has constituted the sole nourishment of her spiritual life is one I should blush to submit to the eyes of educated readers, a formula scarcely to be ranked higher than the distich of which "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John" is the first line. And still it *is* a prayer; an outcry of weakness to strength; an acknowledgment of something beyond, above this visible life of ours and its needs. And formula, superstition, parrot-like repetition of soulless words—call it by what name one will—Jane has never, knowingly, laid her head on her pillow since she was a child without going through it.

She goes through it now; now, for the first time in her existence, probably, learns what prayer means. For she learns that her formula means nothing! She is staring at the sickly daylight on the opposite wall, and kneeling, with her hands joined and lips moving—and her heart dumb. Oh, all you who have suffered, do you not know the meaning of that awful impotence?—her heart dumb!

Well, these things cannot be forced. Prayerless, hopeless, unrepentant, nothing remains for Jane Theobald but to get into her bed, and watch the green light turn to gold, then to white; presently, to hear the birds sing, and then the whistle of the gardener's boy, as he passes under her window to his work. After a time, the servants begin to stir in the house, and Blossy, waking, flings her soft arms round her mother's neck, and asks, as she has done every morning since Saturday, "Why Dada him not here?" and must have her game of romps as usual.

And Blossy has her game; sings nigger melodies at the pitch of her shrill voice; dances fantasias on the bed, barefooted, with nightgown artistically upraised in the morning sunshine; Jane forced to listen to her, forced to look at her! For what might the servants think—so low has she sunk already, Jane, who, as long as she was honest, cared not a straw for the opinion of the whole world—what might the servants think if she rang earlier than on another morning to have the child taken away to the nursery?

By-and-by comes her own getting up and dressing. Her limbs ache as they never ached after any ball before, her hands tremble, her throat feels parched; and still, thanks to yesterday's scorching on the racecourse, or to the fever of the night, her cheeks retain their colour. When she comes downstairs she is able to force her voice, as near as may be, into its accustomed tone. The servants, if questioned hereafter, will be ready, doubt not, to affirm that "Missus never looked better, nor in better spirits, and took her breakfast hearty, and seemed quite cheerful with Miss Blossy." Trustworthy, discriminative souls! Is it not upon evidence like this that the history of half our fireside tragedies is written?

And the morning hours drag slowly by. Blossy's dinner-time comes, and then, as Jane sits at table attending to the child, and making what pretence she can of swallowing food herself, arrives a servant from The Folly with a note—the same that should have been sent over to her last night—from Mr. Theobald.

"Dear Jane," her lord and master writes, "after what you said to-day, I conclude you will not mind going to the ball alone. Lord Barty Beaudesert has asked me to stay with him for a few days on board his yacht at Cowes. I start to-night. Address to me, 'On board the Laïs, at Cowes,' if you should have occasion to write. Impossible to say for certain when I shall be back.

"Your affectionate husband,

"FRANCIS THEOBALD.

"P.S.—If you want money, you will find some in my Russia-leather case; the key must be in one of my waistcoat pockets in the dressing-room."

Well, the postscript is important; more important, possibly, than Mr. Theobald imagined when he wrote it. Not many human actions, virtuous or criminal, can come to fruition unless they have cash as a basis; none, certainly, involving railway fares and steamboat tickets; and Jane was brought by current household expenses to her last sovereign yesterday.

Mr. Theobald's thoughtfulness is opportune.

She goes upstairs to his dressing-room, searches for the key, happily or unhappily finds it, and gets what money she believes will suffice to carry her to Brussels—eight or ten pounds in gold. This done, she divests herself of the few trinkets she chances to have about her, her chain and watch, a brooch of some slender value, her rings (except her wedding-ring; she will wear that a little longer yet); then puts on her hat and shawl, and stands ready to go, richer only by those eight or ten sovereigns and by her wedding-ring than on the day when she came to Francis Theobald as a bride.

Now there is one last farewell to be uttered—farewell between mother and child, between soul and body. Get that wrench over with as little thinking about it as possible, and quickly. The train by which she means to go is express, exact to a second. Not too much time left her, as it is, for walking to the station.

Blossy is amusing herself alone in the breakfast room downstairs. This room, as I have said, is the cheerfullest one in the house—the room into which Jane has collected together everything in the shape of mirror or ornament Theobalds can boast. It makes a charming little theatre for Bloss, who indeed wants no other entertainment when she has got an abundance of looking-glass to reflect her own small figure, and represent imaginary audiences as she sings and dances.

Especially contented with the world, and everything in it, is Miss Theobald at this moment. Auntie Min brought her a gift of gorgeous cherry-coloured sash and shoulder-knots from London yesterday, requesting, as she gave it, that the finery should be enjoyed, not locked away, too fine for use, out of Blossy's jurisdiction. So over her little holland house-frock the child, in the seventh heaven of enraptured vanity, disports her grandeur.

Nor is she quite without company.

The paper of the room is of quaint old-fashioned design, all white-and-gold arabesque, with impossible palm-trees intermingled, and small green monkeys sitting or clinging by impossible tails and hands among the boughs. Well, as Jane enters in her travelling-dress—leaden-eyed, leaden-hearted—Bloss, with infinite grace and vanity of gesture, is just exhibiting her ribbons to the monkeys—curtseying to this one, extending a shoulder-knot to that, holding forth the smart fringed end of her sash, with disdainful sense of superiority, to another. She takes no notice whatsoever of her mother's entrance, but continues, self-absorbed and grave, to bestow her salutations around. So Jane goes up, and lays her gloved hand upon her head.

"Good-bye, Bloss," she says, in a thick hoarse voice: then snatches hold of her tight, kisses neither lips nor brow, but buries her face for a moment among the child's mass of silken curls.

"Mine zibbons—pitty zibbons!" cries Bloss, stroking her ruffled finery with tender fingers, and freeing herself with a little push from the interruption. "Me dot pitty zibbons."

And then back to her bows and curtseys and attitudinising before her friends the monkeys.

A natural action enough, that push. What matters the universe, with all the love it contains, to a child still untired of its last new plaything?

But to Jane's ruined heart a death-stab.

Even the child wants her not; the child is Theobald's—will be better off, "both as regards this world and the next," without her than with her.

So that wrench is over—the one good-bye she had to speak, spoken. And now out into the open daylight, into the sight of men, and on with her journey.

CHAPTER XLII

FAST AND LOOSE WITH DESTINY

JANE'S destination is Dover; from thence, by night-mail to Ostend, and then on to Brussels—after which point our story is not further concerned.

She has made no plan in detail of the journey, and on reaching Dover learns, to her dismay, that she will have more than three hours to wait. The Belgian steamer, so one of the railway porters informs her, does not start till seven—passengers not allowed on board till half-past six. Where is she to spend these hours? how kill this hideous interval of time, without the narcotic of action or movement to deaden her pain—still the remorse that already, the first stage of her journey scarce over, burns at her heart?

She knows several of the large Dover hotels, having stopped there often in better innocent days with Theobald; but, dreading recognition, will show her face at none of these—will sooner bear her three hours' ordeal, alone, unnoticed, in the ladies' waiting-room at the station. However, the atmosphere of the waiting-room makes her faint and sick; after a time, too, she begins to think (Jane grown a coward in such matters!) that the austere-looking woman who guards the water-bottle and tracts, eyes her with suspicion: and so wanders forth into the streets, resolved, if walking be possible, to pass the remainder of the time, until she can go on board, in the open air.

She finds that it is not possible. Walking wants strength, and Jane, after ten or twelve minutes' trial, discovers, with terror, that she has no strength left. At last, seeing a small but decent inn, not far from the harbour, she enters it, and in a halting voice asks the tawdrily-dressed landlady, who comes out to meet her, if she can have a sitting-room to herself for a couple of hours. She has to wait until the departure of the Ostend boat at seven.

The woman gives her a hard look—the logic of a landlady's facts disinclining her, doubtless, towards female travellers devoid of luggage or ostensible masculine protection. "A sitting-room? Why, yes; folks can have a parlour to theirselves, of course, by paying for it, but——"

"I will pay you what you choose to ask me," is Jane's answer, hurriedly drawing out and opening her purse.

At which the hard look mollifies. *Next* to masculine protection, what so respectable as a well-filled purse! "Ah, the young lady is going across the water, is she? 'Tis to be hoped, for her sake, the night will be fine; but the sailors don't like the look of the sky, and the wind is changing fast." Then, after leading her some steps along a stifling beery passage, mine hostess shows her guest into a stifling beery parlour, overlooking the harbour and shipping, and redolent of both, and leaves her alone.

The furniture of this parlour consists of a rickety horsehair couch, a table, a couple of chairs, and a shelf holding a few odd volumes of musty leather-bound books. Its adornments are: Dover Castle in shell-work, a bunch of grotesquely unnatural feather tulips, and a mezzotint engraving of H.M. King William the Fourth; H.M. curveting on a lambswool charger through a lambswool forest, with the towers of Windsor, royally defying every rule of perspective, in the background.

Well, before Jane has been here three minutes, it seems to her as though this miserable place and its belongings—yes, even to the grouping of the unnatural tulips, the simper on the face of

majesty—had been familiar objects for years. With such ease do we attune ourselves, in certain overstrung states of mind and body, to each successive accompaniment, or background of our pain! Her first hope, when the woman left her alone, was—that she might sleep. No matter how uninviting the couch; she would rest her throbbing temples on its pillow, in an attitude, at least, of sleep. And sleep will not come near her. The very attempt at rest has but quickened the unrest of her brain. No escape that way. She must *face* conscience, at last: must bear whatever torture her own thick-coming, morbidly vivid thoughts have power to inflict upon her.

They shape themselves, bit by bit, into a retrospect, mocking her sick heart by its brightness, of all the happiest periods of her life. Blankly staring at the opposite wall, and at the face of simpering mezzotint majesty, Jane bethinks her of the childish years when she and Min ran wild about the precincts of Drury Lane and Covent Garden—of her shortlived girlish dreams of theatrical success—of that first day when Theobald "stood, and fell in love with her," despite her darned merino and the shabby roses in her hat, from the half-lit slips of the Royal!

. . . She did not care for him so very much, she remembers, in the early days of their courtship; or so, confident of her power, she used to tell him. She had seen other men she fancied as well before. Mr. Theobald, if he liked, might go. Presents?—oh, she wouldn't take a present from a prince! Give up the stage and become a lady? With her agreement signed, and her dresses ready, and success certain—thanks! The honour of Mr. Theobald's preference was great, but she preferred liberty to honour: was too young to know her own mind yet: Mr. Theobald might go. And he went: for two days, during which the world turned black to her, stayed away; then, suddenly, when she was beginning to think he had taken her at her word and gone for ever, made his appearance at the old corner of Wellington Street, as she was returning home from rehearsal, and said: "Jane, my dear, I want your answer to a certain question—there can be only one answer for you to give, you know—Will you throw up your engagement and marry me?" And there *was* only one answer for her to give. She threw up her engagement and married him.

She remembers their most Bohemian wedding-day: Theobald, in a morning suit, smoking his pipe until he reached the vestry door; herself in a bonnet made by her own hands, and a print dress; with only just sufficient witnesses in the gloomy London church to render the marriage legal. She remembers their honeymoon (the honeymoon that to Jane's heart never quite waned) on the Continent.

Summer was in its bloom; they went to Ems, Frankfort, Baden-Baden. Oh, the sunshine of those days! Oh, the nights, white with stars, when, hands furtively clasped, they used to wander, listening a little to the music, and much to their own whispers, among dim-lit Kursaal gardens! Oh, the out-of-door dinners and suppers, those two alone—wanting no other guest, save the invisible guest, Love, who sat between them!

She thinks of their winter in Homburg, of her money troubles—light ones in sooth; was not Theobald her lover still? Then of her child's birth; of Blossy's first imperfect words; of the day, at ten months old, when, miracle of a baby, Blossy ran from her knee alone to Theobald's arms. She remembers . . . Ah, my God, no! These are not things to think of, unless one would go mad outright. Think, instead, of later cruel days—of the neglect, the faithlessness, that are the justification of one's guilt. . . . And thought will not be put in shackles. Thought turns from the living, miserable present; flies back swift-winged, to the honeyed years that are dead—the years, with all their sins of omission, undarkened by a solitary cloud of coldness or estrangement.

How she has *loved* life since her marriage? Homeless, spendthrift, vagrant though they have been, how few thorns have grown among their roses! They have lived, openly and avowedly, for pleasure only, and have found it, or Jane has: pleasure in her dress and balls and vanities, pleasure in her child and husband, pleasure in the mere fact of drawing breath, and of being young and fair.

And now all is over: not a wreck of the old joy left; and through no fault of hers—our souls are kinder to us, sometimes, than life is—through no fault of hers. Inch by inch, foot by foot, she has been hurried towards this precipice, upon whose last ledge she stands, wanting, striving to regain her footing, but borne down ever by fate, stronger than her will.

If society—if six, four, two—nay, if one kindly human heart had bidden her Godspeed when she came to Chalkshire: if the harsh judgments wrongly visited on her had been visited, righteously, on Lady Rose Golightly; if—but why make one's weary brain wearier with such "ifs?" Does right, does justice exist in the world at all? "There's a law for the rich and a law for the poor: a law for men and a law for women: a law for the well-born, and a law for those who are not." The words spoken by Charlotte Theobald yesterday return, abruptly, to her remembrance, and with them returns the thought of Charlotte Theobald's outstretched hand: "If you want a friend, and the time may come sooner than you think, you'll know where to find one."

In that chill offer was there just a last chance of salvation for her? Is it possible—Heaven, is it possible?—that it might be her means of salvation yet?

She starts up from the couch, and for a minute or two walks up and down the room; then, her heavy limbs aching after even this exertion, sinks down again into her former place.

Salvation possible, and at the hands of Francis Theobald's sisters! What! return a suppliant for their compassion; tell the truth

(even in such a strait as this no plan involving falsehood crosses Jane's imagination; to whatever depth she fall, the one virtue of truth must remain linked to her thousand other crimes); standing in the Miss Theobald's starched drawing-room—with the curious self-torturing instinct of the miserable, she puts the whole scene before herself in detail—looking into the Miss Theobalds' starched faces, make her confession. She had abandoned home, child, husband; deliberately, and of her own free will, set out upon the path of dishonour; then, at the first stage of her journey, pluck failing her, had come back repentant, to sue for mercy! What answer would a woman receive at the hands of such women, of any women, to such an appeal? Charlotte Theobald would stand by her—little doubt of that—as Jane had seen a policeman stand by some wretch whom the crowd would roughly handle, but whom it is the policeman's duty to protect and keep intact for the official tortures of the condemned cell or penitentiary . . . She, Jane Theobald, would be in a kind of select condemned cell, or private family penitentiary, for the rest of her life, were she to give herself over to the law in the person of Charlotte Theobald. A woman, not of aristocratic birth, who has made one false step, half a false step, *and acknowledged it*, and retrograded, must, as society at present is framed, be branded with a scarlet or other letter until her life's end.

Why, to go bravely on, run the whole gauntlet of shame, with shame's chances (not a few, take them altogether) of final success, were better wisdom, as far as any prospect of social rehabilitation goes.

She raises her eyes, and Majesty seems to give a smile of benign approval at the sentiment!

After a time re-enters the hostess, suspicious, no doubt, that the solitary female traveller may be making away with the chairs and tables. The solitary female traveller rests wearily in the same place on the couch, her head lying back against the wall, her face fever-red and haggard. Will she take dinner?—tea? Will she take refreshments—tartly this—of *no* kind? Soda-and-brandy. To be sure. Excellent thing a soda-and-B. before a sea-voyage, and a Captain's biscuit with it. The last not ordered by Jane, but suggested, as costing an extra threepence, by the hostess. In another minute some nauseous compound in a tumbler, with a plate of villainous-looking fossil sea-biscuits, are set before her.

Jane had scarcely tasted food since her luncheon on the race-course yesterday. Excitement has been her meat—no very healthy nutriment, as we know, but all-satisfying while it lasts. It satisfies her still. She swallows the contents of the tumbler; in spite of its nauseous taste feels strengthened by it. Then, with a sense that consumption of food in some shape is required of her, puts one of the fossil biscuits into her pocket, and rings the bell; desiring to pay quickly that which she owes for her entertainment and *start*.

"Use of sitting-room, a shilling. Brandy-and-soda, a shilling. Biscuits, threepence. Attendance, ditto. Total, two-and-sixpence."

Jane draws forth her purse to requite this last hospitality her native land shall offer her. It contains only gold—yellow tempting sovereigns; won, did she but know it, at The Folly overnight! And again the hostess's hard eyes soften humanly. Attendance is charged threepence; may be made sixpence if a guest has a mind to behave handsome; and will the lady be kind enough to wait for a minute or so? She must just step inside her own sitting-room behind the bar to get change.

The lady waits—standing beside the shelf of leather-bound volumes I have mentioned. . . . And now occurs to Jane Theobald one of those curious chance revelations, which at seasons, in places the most unexpected, through agencies the most outwardly trivial, do shine in our souls in their hour of direst necessity. She stands, I say, waiting—inert, half-stupefied. Her body is weak, the brandy, of its kind, was strong. And as she stands thus, sees a little marker of red ribbon appearing above the edges of one of the dingy books.

If the ribbon had been black, Jane had probably never noticed it. The red strikes her attention mechanically. Mechanically she takes the book—an odd volume of sermons by Bishop Porteous—from the shelf; opens it listlessly at the place marked, and reads, in the big pale type, on the yellow-ribbed paper of a century ago, this passage:

"And as it sometimes happens that they who have the weakest and most distempered frames, by means of an exact regimen and unshaken perseverance in rule and method, outlive those of a robuster make and more luxuriant health; so there are abundant instances, where men of the most perverse dispositions and most unruly turn of mind, by keeping a steady guard upon their weak points, and gradually but continually correcting their defects, going on from strength to strength, and from one degree of perfection to another, have at length arrived at an higher pitch of virtue than those for whom nature had done much, and who would therefore do but little for themselves.

"Let us then never despair."

Common enough words, it may be said Sunday utterances of a place-seeking chaplain who, in the hope of lawn-sleeves under George III., wrote, on the occasion of George II.'s funeral, that "earth was not pure enough for the deceased king's abode: his only place was heaven." No matter. They have done good work for once; have delivered to one lost soul the highest message a man's words can ever convey to his fellows: redemption for the fallen strength for the weak, hope for all. "Let us then never despair."

Jane walks forth from the inn with limbs that know not their heaviness; mine hostess watching her departure with sagely prophetic shake of the head. A wedding-ring was on the gi

finger truly, but people may come to no good even with that! She walks down to the quay through rain, now beginning to fall in heavy showers, and heeds it not. Her brain is on fire, her whole moral nature in a state of exaltation. Material conditions of fatigue or wet affect her not.

Arrived, with a string of other foot-passengers, by the side of the Belgian steamer, she stands for a space, because those about her stand: when her turn comes, files across the gangway like the rest.

"From strength to strength: from perfection to perfection. Let us then never despair." The words lift her to a kind of ecstasy. She repeats them in her heart again and again, as though to repeat them were of itself an act of salvation! And all the time the vessel is getting up its steam fast, the vessel that is to bear her another stage on her journey to Brussels, and she makes no effort—it does not suggest itself to her half-delirious thoughts to make an effort—to leave it. "From strength to strength; from perfection to perfection."

"Better go down below, mum, hadn't you?" says a sailor's rough, friendly voice. "You're getting wet through up here on deck."

"Getting!" Why, her chest and shoulders are wet to the skin already, the sensation, as far as she feels it at all, pleasurable. However, she obeys instantly; directed by the same friendly voice, goes below; then makes her way, guided by the flicker of a lamp, through a half-opened door, into the ladies' cabin. Ladies are ranged around in berths prepared for sea-sickness; the stewardess sits chatting to a rosy-faced young woman, evidently in her own rank of life, who holds a child in her arms. Jane sinks down on the sofa just within the door, and listens—hears rather, to listen denotes an act of voluntary attention—hears what the two women talk about. They talk dramatically, after the manner of uneducated people, about what "he" said, and "she" said; they enter, unreservedly and aloud, into the details of their own private affairs. At the end of two or three minutes Jane knows that the younger woman is returning home to her husband, who owns some sort of hotel or lodging-house in Ostend, and that her name is Smith. And she is sensible of a certain remote feeling of comfort from the knowledge. The woman's voice and face are kindly; some faintest clue to human kinship seems given in the fact of knowing her name. If—if this queer sensation of weakness should get worse, one's head more unsteady, it might be well that there were *someone* near—some pitying Christian woman (not of the upper or visitable classes) to hold out a hand of succour in one's need!

Creak, creak, go the boards, resounding under many feet overhead; the wind whistles; the big drops beat against the skylight.

"We shall have a roughish night of it, I'm afraid, ma'am," observes the younger woman, clasping the child she holds tighter to her breast as she addresses the stewardess.

"Yes, and the tide against us, too," answers the latter, with the equanimity of a human being to whom an extra rough sea only means extra seasick ladies and extra fees to oneself. "But your little maid's a good sailor, Mrs. S."

"Well, yes, bless her! She don't often ail, by sea or by land."

And putting back her shawl with tender hand, the woman reveals to Jane's aching sight . . . Blossy. Not the veritable living Blossy (at this moment, doubtless, asleep and rosy in her cot), but Blossy notwithstanding. To a mother every little child is in some measure hers, and brings her, even more vividly than memory can, into the presence of the one she has left.

"A big girl, Mrs. Smith," remarks the stewardess, looking down critically at the small sleeper. "I doubt but she's too stout for health?"

"Not she," cries the mother quickly. "You should see her shoulders when she stands upright! and such a pair of legs! and only three years old next Michaelmas. Smith was all for keeping her home with him. I was called away, to poor father sudden, ma'am, as you know, and Smith wanted to keep the child home along of him. But, bless you, I couldn't be happy and her out of my sight! A young child like that, as I say, they're well to-day and sick to-morrow."

The stewardess shakes her head with the habitual melancholy of her profession: "You may say that, my dear. 'Well to-day, and *gone* to-morrow!' And this summer especial. I never knew so much sickness as there is among the young children this summer."

Jane starts to her feet; she turns abruptly from the sight of the sleeping child, and gropes her way out of the cabin. The words of the sermon spoke to her conscience, as we have seen, but from without—artificially. She kept upon the road to Brussels still. Every fibre of her nature, bodily and mental, is smitten by the women's careless talk; smitten through the instinct which lies at the very root and foundation of all conscience. One blind, mighty hunger—to get back to the child she has abandoned—fills her heart. Blossy's kisses, Blossy's songs and dances, the sweets, the quintessence of her woman's life—what mattered the slights of the world, the censure of narrow brains and dull malice, nay, what mattered Theobald's infidelity while she had these? And she has forsaken these: has put a barrier between herself and all that to her is life for evermore. Oh, fool! into what black night of hopeless, loveless despair was she not about to drift? *Was?*—ay, for she will turn back yet. What to her is society, or the reception that awaits her from society? She will have Blossy—has done nothing (God be thanked for that!) to forfeit the pressure of Blossy's arms, the touch of Blossy's lips.

Her strength seems to have come back by miracle. She reaches the deck without an effort. All that remains now is to walk back on shore and to the station, and take the first train that will bear her, no matter how short a stage, upon her journey home.

Home? No, Jane, not so; not thus may we play fast and loose with destiny. She reaches

the deck, is conscious of a certain tremulous movement of the vessel; and, looking quickly around through the driving rain, sees a gleam of lights, the outline of dark moving objects, on either side. A second longer look conveys to her the whole truth. The steamer at this very moment is passing outward through the narrow mouth of Dover Harbour. Return is impossible.

CHAPTER XLIII

LORD BARTY AND HIS FRIENDS

THE club gardens at Cowes. Picturesque groups of yachting people in after-dinner dress. Mingled exhalations of Havannah cigars, August flowers, and Cowes mud. Conversation a trifle more animated, perhaps, than the after-dinner conversation of the same people would be in London, but abounding in much the same scintillations of wit and intellect. A foreground group, with whom we have concern—Lord Barty Beaudesert and the guests who, during the last forty-eight hours, have been enjoying his hospitality and the charms of each other's society on board the "Laïs."

It is said, pleasantly, by those who should know them best, their greatest enemies and their greatest friends, that the race of Beaudesert has always consisted, in pretty equal divisions, of knaves and fools. Of the pair of noble brothers who are the race's living representatives, Lord Barty Beaudesert is—not the fool! You need but look into his face to see that. Though, for my part, I hold that knave and fool are convertible terms. No man would be a knave unless he were in some degree a fool; no fool have you ever met who had not in him the potential elements, at least, of knavery.

Lord Barty has the typical "classic" fool's profile of all the Beaudeserts, with the prominent, lacklustre, Beaudesert eye; and still something which scarcely rises to intellect—the sharp wide-awake look, rather, that you will find in a wiry little fox-terrier—redeems his smooth red face from the absolute Beaudesert vacuity.

Very wide awake indeed is Lord Barty Beaudesert; very well known, and with no snow-white reputation, in betting-rings, billiard rooms, and all other resorts where the winning and losing of men's money is legitimate business.

And still Lord Barty is a poor man; for the son and brother of a duke, a very poor man indeed.

He keeps a yacht—hires it, rather, captain, crew, and all (nothing in the world is absolutely Lord Barty's own)—on principles of economy. "The cheapest thing going, a yacht," Lord Barty says. "No house-rent, no taxes, no servants. And then you know your outgoing expenses to a shilling."

Lord Barty adds nothing about your incoming revenue; and this to a hospitable yachtsman, fond of loo and chicken-hazard, and blessed with friends of the pigeon-like nature of little Lord Verreker—and, it may be hoped, of this Dundreary fellow Rose is soft about—is not inconsiderable.

The Dundreary fellow Rose is soft about has not, as things at present stand, proved a very lucrative speculation to Lord Barty Beaudesert. Not a man, at any time, whom I would classify as belonging to the genus pigeon is Francis Theobald, although his extreme guilelessness of manner has more than once led even professional fanciers of those birds astray in their judgment upon him; and during the past few days, ever since he determined, indeed, to "follow up his luck" at The Folly, Theobald has been enjoying fortune unprecedented—the fortune of a man whom all the gods have conspired to ruin.

Last night—'twas a roughish night at sea, as we know; but weather that might cruelly toss a small mail-steamer in the Channel is comparatively unfelt in the smooth land-locked roads off Cowes—last night after the boat-race, there was a dinner, with a little loo, when the ladies left, on board the "Laïs;" and Theobald won everything. Young Lord Verreker fell a victim, naturally. For what end do Lord Verrekers of one-and-twenty exist at all (on board the "Laïs" especially), unless it be to fall victims? But the same fate befell the veterans; the same fate befell Harry Desmond and Lord Barty. No science, no combination of science, could hold its own against the aces and kings of Mr. Theobald.

I repeat it, a most unfavourable speculation has this Dundreary fellow Rose is soft about proved to Lord Barty Beaudesert—*how* unfavourable a one is being discussed between Colonel Desmond and Lord Barty at this moment; Loo Childers chatting, with the innocent frankness that proved Mr. Smylie's undoing, to foolish young Lord Verreker; Lady Rose and Mr. Theobald talking in low murmurs, on a rustic seat, a little apart from the rest.

When men and women, in real life, not romance, talk together in this murmuring fashion, I have ascertained, after much close practical observation, that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the exhaustion of tone is accompanied by a corresponding exhaustion of ideas. You watch some whispered colloquy, every word of which, judging from outward manner, should be fraught with perilous dramatic interest; you listen, and hear wire-drawn monosyllables about the last change in the weather, or the approaching change in bonnets. The interesting murmuring pair have long ago, to the best of their ability, "said everything." Lady Rose has by no means reached this fatal climax in a tender friendship. But Theobald reached it long ago. He is not, as I have often repeated, a ladies' man. With his wife he is never bored; but then Jane is not a lady! Jane, in her ignorance, her originality, her chamelion-like moods of thought and temper, is always more or less amusing. Lady Rose is not amusing in the least, when one has had six or seven days of Lady Rose Golightly. And Theobald dimly suspects—in the inmost recesses of his soul, a horrible suspicion is beginning to gain ground—that Lady Rose Golightly, at thirty years of age, is capable of far more constant feelings than was Lady Rose Beaudesert

at twenty-two; capable, it may be, of that last resource of worn-out women of the world, a serious passion. But if he were convinced of this, and convinced that he were to be the object of the passion, Mr. Theobald, you may be very sure, would get on board the next steamer that leaves Cowes for the mainland, and bid Lady Rose Golightly, and every person and thing belonging to her, an eternal good-bye!

The murmurs become more and more languid, and Lady Rose's cunning wastes itself in vain efforts to instil into them some kind of galvanic light. Sprightliness, sentiment, veiled half-reproaches, all fall blankly to the ground. At last, happily, occurs a diversion. A boy in red-and-blue uniform enters the gardens not twenty steps away from where Theobald and his companion are sitting, one of the ominous orange-coloured envelopes we all of us know too well, in his hand.

"Those terrible little telegraph-boys!" says Lady Rose. "I have never been able to see one of them without a shudder since I lost my Coco. Coco was my Maltese, Mr. Theobald. The most beautiful dog in London, and affectionate!—the only creature, I do believe, that ever loved me on earth."

"Case of a dear gazelle," responds Mr. Theobald, sensible that some kind of murmured imbecility is expected of him.

"Case of a dear gazelle, as you say. The poor old love was sickening when I had to leave town, so I gave strict orders to Burton to let me know if he got worse. On the second day after I left I got a telegram. Servants are so cruelly inconsiderate. It would have been just as well, as I *had* gone, to spare me the last sad scene. Two of the first dog-doctors had seen Coco, and there was no hope. I rushed up to town that night just in time to see him alive. He died in my arms."

"Happy Coco!" observes Theobald, knocking the ashes from the tip of his cigar.

"And from that day to this the sight of a telegraph-boy makes me get cold. I received another most distressing shock, I remember, when my poor mother had her last fatal illness. We were in the Highlands, just in the middle of one of the pleasantest shooting parties. . . Really, I think there should be a law that some other hired person should be sent on first, to prepare one for the telegraph-boys."

"Or better still, have some hired person to bear one's distressing shocks for one," observed Theobald, "like the deputy mourners at an Irish funeral."

"Ah, if civilisation could only arrive at that!"

Lady Rose sighs and looks pensive. Mr. Theobald leans back on the rustic seat, speculating, perhaps, as to whether civilisation will ever allow of tender friendships being done by deputy, too. The messenger comes nearer. One of the club-waiters, to whom he has addressed himself, seems to point among the group we are watching for the person of whom he is in search.

"How glad I am we did not give a definite 'Yes' to Mrs. Dulcimer!" says Lady Rose. Mrs. Dulcimer, a lady of nautical and other reputation, has asked all Cowes to dance on board her yacht to-night; but Lady Rose, mindful of Mr. Theobald's prejudices, has left the question of going open. If her strength allowed—and if dear Mrs. Dulcimer would take so undecided an answer—she would be charmed. But in this hot weather Lady Rose is such a terribly poor creature; not knowing, till the eleventh hour, what Lady Rose's strength will allow her to do! "We should be quite sure of being bored if we went?"

"Quite sure," Mr. Theobald acquiesces; mentally deciding that they would be tolerably certain of *that* anywhere, and under any circumstances.

And the messenger, with the orange envelope in his hand, approaches nearer.

"Really and truly, I believe the telegram is for us," observes Lady Rose, looking over her shoulder with languid interest. "No, for Barty. Barty gets mysterious messages from his horrid jockeys and horse-racing people from morning till night."

But no; the orange envelope is not for Lord Barty Beaudesert. Finger to cap, the boy addresses his lordship, and, by a little nod of his lordship's head, has the rightful object of his search pointed out to him. Another three seconds—another three seconds, the last, of rose-watered boredom, and tender friendship, and Lady Rose Golightly—and the orange envelope is in Francis Theobald's hands.

"Martha Smith, 4, Rue de la Cloche, Ostend, to Francis Theobald, on board the 'Laïs,' Cowes:

"Sir,—A lady named Jane Theobald lies here in my house dangerously ill. A letter she has about her bears your address. Please telegraph instructions, or come without delay."

Theobald starts up to his feet, his face turning to the ghastly corpse-like hue very blonde-complexioned people do turn when the current of their blood is set suddenly awry. "No bad news from home, I hope?" asks Lady Rose, in her quiet voice, as she watches him. With the selfishness of a thoroughly ignoble passion, it seems to Lady Rose Golightly that any bad news from home for Mr. Theobald must be good news to her.

He does not reply, does not see, hear her. The thought of Jane, of her love for him, of the first fond days of their marriage . . . all that there is yet of good in the man's nature gains mastery over him, in this moment's sharpest agony, and holds him dumb.

"I am really afraid you have had bad news, Mr. Theobald," cries Lady Rose. And as she speaks she rises, gracefully agitated, and stands beside him.

He puts the telegram, without a word of answer or of comment, into her hand.

"Most distressing—and so sudden!" Thus sympathises Lady Rose, not lifting her eyes from the paper. "We must hope, indeed we must hope, that there may be some mistake or exaggeration. So often exaggeration in cases of illness! Would it not be well to telegraph for details?"

But, even as she says this, Theobald, unheed-

ing her, questions the boy about the Portsmouth steamers. Quietly he speaks—death itself could not make Francis Theobald outwardly flurried—but in an odd hoarse voice; Lady Rose can scarcely recognise it as Theobald's; and with no faintest return of colour to his blanched face.

"The steamer, the last steamer to Portsmouth, has not left yet, but the gentleman won't have a moment to lose if he wants to catch it. The boat starts sharp in these flood-tides. Trains from Portsmouth? Well, he doesn't know for certain—believes the last steamer from the island runs to catch the mail up."

"Something dreadful is certainly going on," remarks Loo Childers, pausing in her flirtation with Lord Verreker. "Don't you think it might be as human for us to inquire what? Just look at the colour of Mr. Theobald's face."

Lord Verreker, lifting his hand to the foolish lip where one day there may be a moustache, lisps, "Ya—as to be sure; inquire, shall we?" And the pair rise. But by the time they reach Lady Rose (Loo prepared with charming platitudes, adapted to any shade of condolence), Theobald is in the act of leaving.

No human being, not even the faithful friend, Loo Childers, will ever know what were the last words spoken between Lady Golightly and the man who was her lover once. But one trifling circumstance Miss Childers notes and remembers—perhaps may too accurately remember when the faithful friendship shall have gone the way of all mortal alliances. Lady Rose's handkerchief, a dainty perfumed morsel of lace-and-cambric, has fallen to the ground—fell there, doubtless, in the moment of her graceful agitation—and Theobald's heel grinds it into the dust as he leaves her. A trifling circumstance, of which Theobald, I am quite sure, is unconscious. But poor Lady Rose—has not Lady Rose eyes to see, and a heart to remember, as well as her friend Loo Childers?

She has more colour in her cheeks than usual, more animation in her expression. "Quite a sensational *dénouement*." Lord Barty and Colonel Desmond have by this time sauntered up, and Lady Rose finds herself in the position of narrator to the whole party. "But so exactly what one might expect! People like Mrs. Theobald cannot even be ill without doing a little theatre. 'Martha Smith to Francis Theobald.' . . . . Oh, thanks," to Lord Verreker, who restores to her the dust-stained lace-and-cambric. "A lady named Jane Theobald" and so on, throughout the telegram.

Silence all round, then a low kind of whistle, accompanied by a singularly ill-pleased expression of face on the part of Lord Barty Beaudesert.

"The question that naturally presents itself to an inquiring mind is—what was Mrs. Theobald doing at Ostend?" Loo Childers volunteers the observation.

"The question that presents itself to my mind is—was she there at all?" remarks Lord Barty Beaudesert.

"And to mine, too," growls Harry Desmond, with a ferocious pull of his thick moustache.

"And—and to mine!" says the little lordling, thinking it savours of worldly wisdom to copy the cynicisms of his elders.

"Whether she is, or is not at Ostend, Mr. Theobald has flown to join her," says Lady Rose, carelessly. "Poor man! the haste in which he rushed of to catch the boat was really exemplary."

"Most exemplary, I've no doubt," sneers Lord Barty, looking sulkier and sulkier.

"And you and I may as well be turning our thoughts towards Mrs. Dulcimer, Loo? As the evening is tolerably cool, I suppose we may as well go?"

Loo assents, with a little look of command at Lord Verreker, and the two ladies prepare to start.

"I'll just tell you what I think, Rose," says Lord Barty, unable to smother his ill-humour any longer. "Mr. Theobald is an old friend of yours, and I renewed my acquaintance with him to please you, so I don't want to be unnecessarily severe. But when a man wins the pot of money Theobald won last night, and gets a telegram enabling him to bolt with it, all I can say is, it's a —— convenient sort of telegram, and a —— shuffling dirty trick for a man to play."

Thus Lord Barty Beaudesert—his finest feelings ruffled by even an apparent want of delicacy or honour on the part of an associate.

"Oh, come, Barty, it never does to look too closely into other people's domestic concerns," answers Lady Rose, lightly. "I suppose in all cases of really happy wedlock, husbands and wives understand each other pretty well."

"I should like to know how much of my money the fellow has got in his pocket at this moment," growls Lord Barty.

"I should like," says Loo Childers, "to know what Mrs. Theobald was doing at Ostend!"

"And I," says Lady Rose, with a little well-dissembled yawn, "should like, if possible, to forget the whole subject! We have troubled ourselves about Mr. and Mrs. Theobald's domestic concerns for at least five consecutive minutes. Come, Loo," putting her hand within her friend's arm, "if we really mean to go to Mrs. Dulcimer's, it is time for us to talk toilettes."

And so the ladies depart. Good-bye, Lady Rose: may you enjoy your ball! May you enjoy the watches of the night—the watches of many another "dead unhappy" future night—that shall succeed!

CHAPTER XLIV

THE CLOSING SCENE

In the room of a foreign hotel my story opened; in the room of a foreign lodging-house it comes to an end. A cleanly-furnished little bedroom, with nasturtiums twining round the window-sill; an engraving or two from Rubens,

pictures on the walls; a narrow bed—with a girl's face resting, awfully white and still and shrunken, upon the pillow.

The window is open, and from her bed Jane can see a square of blue sky, framed round by the glowing orange petals and emerald leaves of nasturtium. The angelus is sounding from some neighbouring church or convent. A bunch of flowers upon the mantelshelf fill all the sick-room with their faint sweet autumn odour.

Jane lies white, still, shrunken, but painless—no longer racked by fierce tortures in limbs or chest, no longer pursued by delirious horrors of the brain. What has been her disease? What, in three cruel weeks, has brought all that brilliant health and youth of hers to this? The little Flemish doctor, here in Ostend, calls it by one long Latin name: the grand English physician, summoned to consultation from Brussels, by another. It must have originated in great mental excitement; it must have originated in exposure to wet and cold. For, having facts laid before them, 'tis surprising how your really clever doctors will find theories to account for them. The truth would seem to be that Jane Theobald has had nearly twenty years of life, and is to have no more! And, when it comes to this, any technical difference in Latin names really matters slightly to the person most concerned.

Nearly twenty years of life . . . She lies alone—Theobald, to humour her, having gone or promised to go into the fresh air—and, looking up at the sky and listening to the angelus, thinks for awhile over those bygone twenty years. Then, with the prescience that comes to us with exceeding bodily weakness, comes to us oftenest when prescience is no longer of much practical use, she looks onward to the future.

Distinctly she can see it: Theobald given back to his own class in life; Blossy brought up "as a lady;" herself forgotten. No, a thousand times, no! Never that. Herself remembered by Theobald as one who loved much, sinned much, died—well, we may say opportunely—and whom he forgave, tended, cherished, with tenderness all beyond her deserts, to the last. But upon this, her hands go to her face, the hot tears start, and, with a pang of bitterness unutterable, Jane realises *how* dear life is, how closely, eagerly she clings to the hope of life yet!

Blossy is well, in London, with Uncle Dick—"perfectly happy and at home," Min's last letter said, "and learning already to play the trombone." It is not because of the child that she yearns for life; she yearns for it—passionately, despite this deathly weakness that assails her—because of Theobald. The child can have no second mother; but Theobald . . . the tears course each other down her cheeks, her wasted frame quivers! Even death itself the jealousy of this poor ignorant soul can transcend.

A hushed step sounds outside; the door opens, shuts, and Theobald comes up to her bed; Theobald, pale, haggard, unshorn: with eyes hollow from much watching; all his dandyism, his Dundrearyism gone.

"What, Jenny—tears?" In an instant his arms are round her; with such small strength as she possesses she has lifted herself to his embrace. "So this is the use you make of your liberty, the first time you have been left alone!"

"I know, Theobald, I'm a fool. The bells set me thinking. I was just—just wondering how Blossy is getting on."

"By Min's account Bloss was never happier in her life; but if you would like to have her here?——"

"Oh, no; we are better as we are, alone. I'm glad"—after a little tired pause this; Jane speaks but few words at a time, and those few faintly—"I'm glad you sent the child to Uncle Dick, poor old fellow!"

"I thought it was what you would have wished, Jenny. Charlotte was very good." Theobald's glass goes to his eye, instinctively, at the mention of his sister Charlotte. "When they first heard of your illness, Charlotte telegraphed to propose that she should come and nurse you" (Jane gives a little shudder), "and that the child should go to Anne. But I settled it differently. Indeed, I had already written to Uncle Dick to take her."

"Is all that long ago, my dear? Have I bee long here?"

"You have been here three weeks, Jane; but we needn't talk about anything that is past now. The past is done with."

"Very nearly, isn't it? The past ended for me, I think, when I saw the lights fade away in Dover Harbour. They took me to the cabin, I remember, and I got faint, and Mrs. Smith held my hand; and after that everything seems blank till I woke up here with you. How good it was of you to come over to me so quick, Theobald!"

"Oh, Jane, child, don't let us speak about my goodness!" is Theobald's answer.

And then there is silence.

Since she rallied—since the fever left her, rather, there has been no rallying of strength—Jane will often lie for an hour together supported by Theobald's arms, neither of them speaking. But to-night she seems more restless. Her cheeks during the last minute have got the colour in them again that Theobald dreads. A sort of excitement is in her eyes.

"Raise me a little," she says to him, after a time—"raise me and hold me up, sitting. I want to see how I look in that glass opposite."

He obeys her with difficulty; how firmly, tenderly, to raise a thing so wasted is not an easy task; and she looks at her own image long and wistfully.

Shrunken though she be from all her fine proportions, her hair cut short to her head, the carnations of her skin turned to waxen paleness, a stranger seeing Jane for the first time at this moment, would say there was a pretty woman, or the wreck of one. Something sweet, and original, and picturesque, makes her Jane Theobald still, in spite of all that she has lost.

She looks at herself, then round into Theobald's face, and laughs. A poor little ghost of a laugh,

yet it does him good to her it—once more to hear a laugh of any kind from Jane's lips.

"What a hideous scarecrow! Theobald, I am not human."

He answers, as he answers nine out of ten of her remarks, by a kiss.

"You wouldn't find it easy to pin roses among my beauteous locks now. I should have to take, like Mrs. Coventry Brown, to tin-tacks and glue."

"*Should have!*" Oh, the agony of hearing that conditional tense from lips we love! Theobald's heart sinks down again to zero.

"You don't pay me any compliments. You are not like my poor little good Samaritan, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith did her best to cheer me this morning. 'I had a cousin, Mim,'"—though she were dying, Jane must be an actress still: the voice that speaks is Mrs. Smith's—"'A cousin, Mim, had the rheumatic fever as bad as you, and lived years after, and never got the use of her limbs, and weak-like in her intellick.' Theobald, if I recover, I hope I shan't be 'weak-like in my intellick?'"

"Don't jest, Jane—don't jest; I can't bear to hear it."

He lays her tenderly down upon her pillow, rests his face by hers, and soon Jane feels tears that are not her own upon her cheek.

. . . I have never depicted Francis Theobald in any favourable light. I have shown him to be weak, selfish, indolent; a gambler; not too exemplary a husband—not up to the mark, it may be, if judged only by the world's code of honour. Yet even in this man there must be good. Even Francis Theobald cannot, surely, be all scum, all froth, inasmuch as he can love and suffer yet!

And make no mistake as to his position. Do not think that Theobald holds Jane to his heart, sorrows over her as a man without hope, "not knowing." Theobald knows all—knows the whole story of Jane's meditated sin against him, painted, in colours black as night, by Jane herself. During the wild days and nights of her fever, her delirious ramblings (scarce a sentence of which but contained his name and Lady Rose's) told him much. With her first return to reason, with the first coherent words she uttered, he knew all. Truth is strong in her as love; looking with her wan eyes into his eyes, both were poured forth to him together. And his answer was—to take her closer than before to his breast, and forgive her. Not altogether what a man of stoic principles would have done, thus placed. But Francis Theobald, we have long known, has no principles worth speaking of. At all events he forgave her. And with this crowning weakness of his weak, unballasted life I, for one, am not disposed to quarrel.

"Theobald," says she, softly, after a while, "there's just one thing I want to talk to you about. I should like to have it out to-night."

"Not to-night, Jenny; to-morrow you will be stronger. You know what the doctors say about your being excited towards evening."

"I know. 'Madame is apt to get excited towards evening,' say you solemnly. 'Then take the greatest care madame does *not* get excited towards evening,' answer the doctors more solemnly still. However, what I'm going to talk about won't excite me a bit. Theobald"—holding his hand between both her own, and looking at him, fixedly—"I don't want to die!"

Francis Theobald's glass goes to his eye. "There's deuced little in this world for anyone to want to live for," he remarks, drearily.

"If I was sure—certain—that my death wouldn't be for the best . . . But of course it would set you free . . . and then if ever she gets free, as I dare say people like that can, and——"

"What are you talking of, my poor child!" says Theobald, as Jane falters—falters, but holds his hand tighter and tighter between her own. "'If ever she gets free!' Whom do you mean by 'she'?"

"I mean Lady Rose," cries Jane, with a gasp. "Now that I have had courage to say it, I shall be better. Theobald, some day when—when all this is over, and when Mr. Golightly is got rid of, you will marry her!"

"If Mr. Golightly were got rid of," says Theobald, speaking more in his natural voice than he has spoken for days, "and if Lady Rose had a hundred thousand pounds, and I might marry her next moment, I would—not marry her! I would rather break stones on the road than spend my life with Lady Rose."

"And yet——"

"Jenny, let us have no more 'and yets.' Haven't we agreed that the past is done with? We are to go back to the old vagabond days, Jane, you and I. I mean to sell Theobalds: I mean that Chalkshire, and everything belonging to Chalkshire, shall be as though they had never been."

For a moment she is silent. Then a light, that makes her look almost like the Jane Theobald she once was, trembles over all her worn white face.

"The old vagabond days—you and me alone, again? Theobald, never mind the doctors! I *can't* die. I don't think I'm a coward. As long as I could hold your hand, I'd go anywhere, in this world or the next. . . . That wouldn't be death! But not alone. . . . Oh, my dear, put your arms round me—close. Love me, and I shall live. Love me, Theobald, me alone in the whole world, and I shall cheat the doctors yet!"

* * * * *

And she kept her word, Reader; she lives. The men of science found another many-syllabled Latin word for the cause of her miraculous recovery. I think, myself, the four letters L O V E spell it in simple English. Houseless, vagabond, "unvisited" Jane lives, and is a supremely happy woman at this hour.

END.

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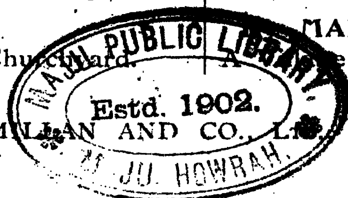
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